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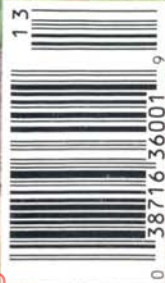
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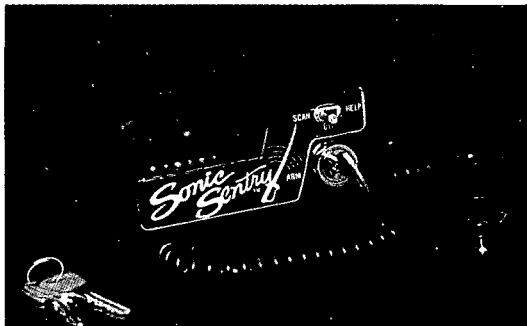


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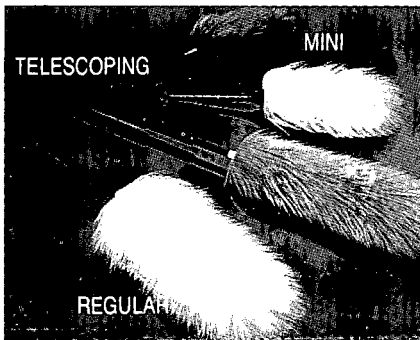
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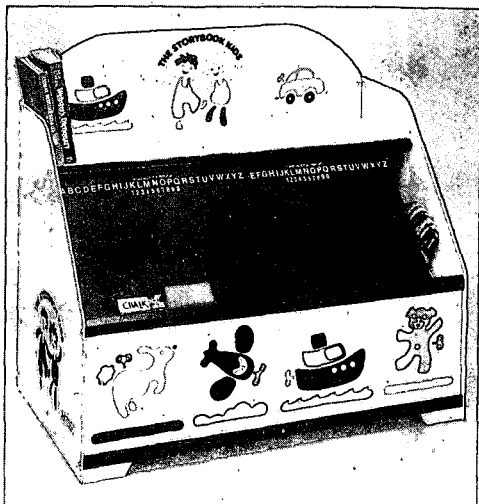
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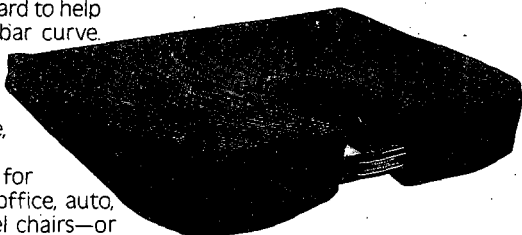
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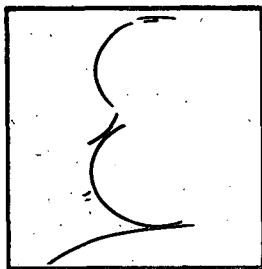


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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

AHMM was founded in 1956, beginning with the December issue of that year (there was no Mid-December issue in those days). With this issue, therefore, we celebrate the magazine's thirty-fourth anniversary.

It has been a good thirty-four years. We haven't made an exact count, but we know it represents approximately four thousand stories published during that time, by hundreds of authors. In the nine years that this editor has been putting the magazine together, a good time has certainly been had by all; we hope our current readers have been as gratified as we by the stories that have flowed into our offices.

The entertainment and suspense and sometimes down-

right scary stuff comes, of course, from both established writers and new ones. We always open up a packet from Dan Crawford or Rob Kantner or Steve Wasylyk or any of our old friends with anticipation; similarly, though, the morning mail brings new possibilities, new writers who might become the Kantners and Wasylyks and Crawfords of tomorrow. Since we can't know exactly which batch of mail will bring one (or several, all at once), we have a (very pleasant) mystery in every mail delivery.

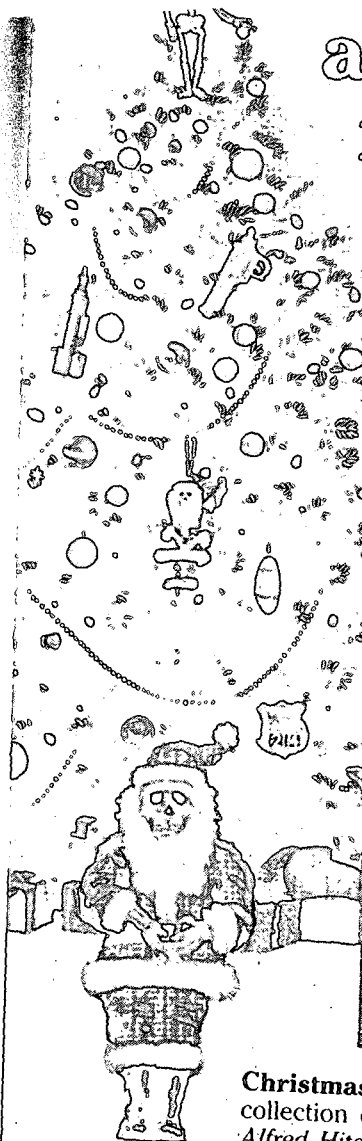
It happens, in the Mid-December 1990 issue of AHMM, that we have four such new writers to introduce to you. Linda Hutton (homemaker), Kim Antieau (librarian), and

(continued on page 221)

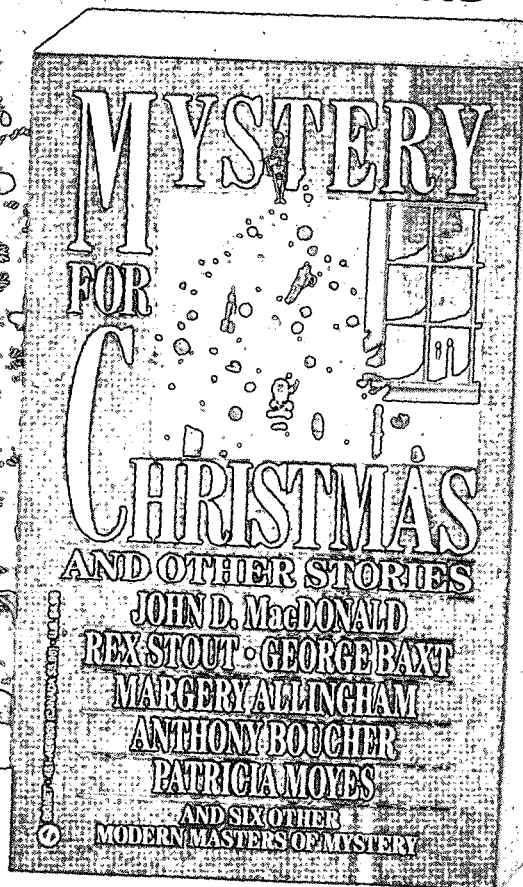
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Stand Firm

by Linda Hutton

My finding a Borden cabinet at a yard sale was the kind of thing every junk buyer and antique hound dreams of. Charles Borden was one of the greatest American furniture designers of this century, and his work is in all the museums. Or it used to be, till he murdered his wife and was hanged for it. But all that happened over fifty years ago and was of no interest to me as I wrote a check with shaking hand and passed it over to Mr. Walter, whose yard sale it was. "Got a way to get that junk home?" he asked genially. "It's a heavy thing, I tell you. 'Bout broke my back hauling it out here from the attic."

Actually, I hadn't considered how to remove the cabinet from its surroundings of broken chairs and wheelless bicycles; all I wanted was to own the beautiful thing. From the moment I spotted it as I was driving by, my heartbeat had increased to a rate that would have frightened any cardiologist. Now I gazed at the Borden in dismay—it would never fit into the back seat of my Toyota. Seeing my quandary, Mr. Walter chuckled.

"Let's get a couple of these husky fellers to load it into my pickup, lady," he said. "My wife can take over here, and I'll haul the darn thing to your house. How's that suit you?"

I nodded wordlessly, amazed at his kindness and appalled at his ignorance of the Borden cabinet. The check I had given him would not pay for one of the handles on it, let alone the whole of its shimmering mahogany body (I was already envisioning it polished). Should I tell him how valuable it really was? While I pondered, he directed two muscular young men who staggered under the cabinet's weight. I was still pondering half an hour later as I admired the addition to my living room, placed there by the two guys who had wandered into Mr. Walter's yard sale and been pressed into service. They accepted my offer of cold cans of beer, and one said wistfully, "I kinda wanted that ol' chest for my fly-tying equipment. Give you ten bucks if you ever decide to get rid of it. My name's Jerry. I work at the Shell station on the corner." Get rid of it? Me? Fat chance.

Mr. Walter, philistine that he was, sealed my lips forever when he said, "Glad someone likes that kind of junk, lady. I thought I'd never get rid of it." The three of them clattered away down the stairs and left me alone with Borden.

That's how I thought of that cabinet: a living, breathing piece of fine art named Borden, not a neglected storage piece rescued from an attic. Once I had introduced Borden to Pledge, he shone happily, and his beautiful lines pointed up his true ancestry. I sat back on my heels, dustcloth in hand, gazing at him in awe. A real Charles Borden cabinet, and I owned it, paid for with the money I had received from an architectural mag for an article on American designers. A fitting way to spend the money, I decided. What an investment—I could always sell it to Jerry at the Shell station for ten dollars.

With Vivaldi on the stereo, I settled down at my desk beside Borden to work on the revision of a short story for *Redbook*. My stories for *Redbook* always need revision, but they pay well, so I keep sending in my work. It pays the bills while I work on the Great American Novel.

I had not heard a note of the Mandolin Concerto when I realized I was staring at Borden and forced my eyes back to the page in the typewriter. "She looked up at him, thinking of the child within her, his child had he but known." Drivel! I sighed and yanked out the offending sheet to crumple it up and toss it at the wastebasket. Two points—it went in smoothly.

With the *Four Seasons* rippling around me, I started again on that story and made good progress till it was time to flip the record over. The stereo and wastebasket sit side by side in my tiny office, and there was that page I had thrown into the basket, now spread out on the floor. I picked it up. Why had I smoothed it out? I knew I had crumpled it firmly and tossed it away. And what were these pencil marks? "She gazed up at him wordlessly, her breath coming in gasps that made her breast rise and fall as she thought of the child within her . . ."

Wait a minute. That wasn't what I had written; or was it? It was certainly an improvement on my turgid prose. Returning to my typewriter, I worked in the pencil changes and finished up the revision. There, *Redbook* ought to like that, I thought, as I typed a label and stuck it onto the manila envelope. Perhaps I had rewritten the whole story in a daydream while distracted by Borden.

The next day I walked to the post office to mail the story and

stopped at the library on my way home. I headed for the true crime section in the stacks and looked up that old murder.

It was a famous case, but I had forgotten some details.

Charles Borden, successful and wealthy furniture designer, had killed his wife with an axe and hidden her body in one of the unfinished pieces of furniture in his studio. He then completed work on the cabinet before confessing to police what he had done and leading them to the body. He gave no motive for the crime. The article went on to give a little background about the victim, who had been a best-selling author named Elizabeth Wansdowne, well known for her romantic novels that sold in the millions.

And that was before paperbacks, I thought as I closed the book and returned it to the shelf. In the fiction section, I ran across a whole shelf of Wansdownes and pulled out the fattest to look at. *The Unfinished Winds Trilogy* it was titled; according to the blurb, the author was murdered while working on book three, and the last chapter was never written.

At home I examined my Borden cabinet once more. Yes, there was the designer's brass plate on the back testifying to its genuineness. I had a real Borden in my apartment.

Borden and I coexisted peacefully for another week; then I found my work revised once again. This time it was a first person heart-winger for *Modern Romances* and the penciled revisions were much better than my original draft.

"All right, Borden, what's going on here?" I demanded. He did not reply, of course. Tapping my teeth with a pencil, I paced my office (two steps each way) and considered the alternatives; I was writing in my sleep, I was hallucinating, or Borden was doing the writing. "Much as I appreciate your help, Borden," I said, "I really prefer to do my own writing. That's my job."

"You're not doing your job properly."

It was broad daylight in a modern apartment and I'd never heard of a ghost in the neighborhood, but someone spoke to me.

"Who's there?" I asked brilliantly.

"Me," came the inane reply. "I mean I. I'm never sure of when to use I and when to use me."

"Well, who are you? Why can't I see you?"

"I am Elizabeth Wansdowne, dead these fifty years and more. I don't really mind being dead, though it is rather boring with nothing to do, but I hadn't finished my final novel in the *Winds* trilogy and Charles prevented my writing the last chapter."



IT WAS BROAD DAYLIGHT IN A MODERN APARTMENT AND I'D NEVER HEARD OF A GHOST IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, BUT SOMEONE SPOKE TO ME.

"Charles? Oh, your husband. I read about the murder. If you don't mind my asking, was he guilty?" I queried.

A gentle laugh drifted through the room. "Oh my, yes! He never tried to deny murdering me. Such a temper he had, but what a handsome devil. However, I did object to being stuffed into that cabinet for three days. It was most uncomfortable."

"I can imagine." What was I doing, having a conversation with a ghost? "So, what do you want me to do now? Oh, forgive me, I'm forgetting my manners. Would you like something to drink?"

"That's very kind of you, dear, but I neither eat nor drink in this state. As I say, I have been quite bored; that's why I began working on your fiction. If I may say so, you need to polish up your romantic bone, if you have one. And your dialogue! Your characters are well drawn and your plots are wonderful, but still your writing lacks something."

"That's just what editors say, too," I sighed. "Excuse me while I get a soda."

When I returned, the paper in my typewriter had a whole new paragraph typed on it.

"Hey, this is good stuff, Miss Wansdowne. Thanks."

"You're quite welcome. What sort of typewriting machine is that? I am not familiar with it at all."

"It's electric," I said absently, scanning her words. Wow, she was really good. No wonder she wrote best sellers. "I hope to buy a word processor someday."

"A word what? Never mind. I was looking over one of the letters you received from an editor about a short story you had submitted, and he is completely wrong. Men never understand how to write for women. You must stand firm, dear, and ignore his orders for revision."

"Well, he just suggested . . ."

"Nonsense. Stand firm. That's what I always say, and what I always said to Charles. He never would take my advice, though. We had many discussions about his work. You know he designed furniture? He simply refused to listen to my suggestions for improvements." A sigh punctuated this recital. "But I stood firm."

"Yes, I'm sure you did, Miss Wansdowne. Thanks for your advice and all your help. Would you mind . . . uh, looking at a draft of my novel?" I asked.

"I should be delighted," she replied. "It was most fortunate for me that a writer bought that cabinet. How dull if I'd been taken

home by a milliner or a wheelwright. I will help you with your novel if you—”

“Yes? If I what? I’ll be glad to do anything I can for you, Miss Wansdowne. I saw your unfinished trilogy at the library.”

“If you will finish my trilogy. I shall write that pesky last chapter and you will submit it to my publisher. I’ve had plenty of time to work out all the twists to my plot, and now I’m ready to write it.”

I gasped. “You want me to . . . to finish your famous trilogy? Miss Wansdowne, I—wow!”

So began our collaboration. With Elizabeth Wansdowne rewriting my fiction, I sold everything I sent out and I learned from her, too. Before long, I didn’t need her rewrites. Then we did her last chapter and I sent it to her publisher, who was still in business, and received a contract by return mail, in which he called *me* a ghost writer. Things were looking up.

Until Miss Wansdowne tried to rewrite my novel.

“No, I will *not* change the hero as you suggest,” I told her one morning through clenched teeth.

“But I feel sure—”

“I’m standing firm, Miss Wansdowne, just as you advised.”

“Hmph,” she snorted in a most unladylike way. “You sound more and more like Charles every day. Pigheaded, both of you. I am certain I know better.”

“Charlie Borden took an axe, and gave his Lizzie forty whacks, and when he saw what she had done, he gave her number forty-one,” I sang loudly, if not tunefully.

A shocked silence emanated from my invisible roommate. “How did . . . how did you know about that?” she whispered at last.

“Oh, it’s just a quatrain children sing about the Lizzie Borden murders,” I explained.

“No, not that. I mean the part about ‘what she had done’ in the third line. Charles was furious when he came into his studio and found I had replaced the brass nameplate with a silver one.”

“I should think so,” I said. “Brass was his trademark. Was he really upset with you?”

“My dear, I had never seen him so angry. In fact, that was when he took the axe and . . .”

I interrupted. “Don’t tell me about it if it’s too painful for you.” And for me; I’m squeamish.

“Yes, well . . . perhaps we should work on your novel some other time,” she agreed.

But I discovered the next morning she had rewritten whole chapters while I slept. Not only that, she destroyed my draft so I couldn't keep my version. "Miss Wansdowne!" I bellowed, forgetting about the neighbors in the building. "This time you have gone too far. Where are my chapters? I want this book to be my best, not your best," I protested.

"But *my* best is far superior to your best."

If I owned an axe, I would have mimicked Charles Borden right there. But it's difficult to chop up a ghost.

However, I took the only course of action open to me—I got in touch with Jerry at the Shell station and he got a beautifully polished cabinet to keep his fly-tying supplies in. The ten dollar bill he paid me for Borden just about covered the cost of a fresh ream of typing paper.

Free-lance Operation

by Bill Pronzini

Carmody reached St. Mark's Square, the commercial, artistic, and tourist hub of Venice, just past five of a warm Friday afternoon in September, and took a table at one of the open-air cafes on the piazzetta. He ordered a cup of cappuccino and sat looking out on the wide basin into which the city's two major canals, the Grand and the Giudecca, emptied. The falling sun streaked the water in silver, reflected off the hulls of gondolas, water taxis, passenger ferries, and small commercial craft that dotted its surface.

Fifteen minutes had passed when Della Robbia came out of the swarm of tourists and pigeons flocking the square and sat down across from him.

Carmody said, "Well?"

"The boat has been arranged," Della Robbia answered. He was young and dark and relaxed, and he wore a light gray suit, benchmade shoes, a pair of very dark glasses. He spoke careful, British-accented English.

"Where do I meet it?"

"The Rio di Fontego, at the foot of Via Giordano."

"Ten o'clock?"

"Just as you requested."

"What did you tell the driver?"

"Nothing that he did not need to know."

"Does he speak English?"

"Enough to understand simple directions."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Yes."

"All right," Carmody said.

"You'll get your commission when I get paid. Figure a week."

"Bene," Della Robbia said, smiling, and got to his feet. "Good luck, Signor Carmody."

When Della Robbia had disappeared into a crowd of sightseers gathered before the Ducal Palace, Carmody lighted one of the short, thin, black cigars he liked. He smoked it down slowly, and then stood and gave several lire notes to a passing waiter. Lean, almost predatory, Carmody moved with a smooth, liquid grace. He had leather-tan features, flat green eyes, and shaggy graying-black hair; a sardonic mouth made him look faintly satanic. As he started away, a young microskirted Italian girl sitting at one of the tables smiled invitingly at him. Carmody ignored her; when he

was working, he gave no thought at all to playing.

He walked east to a renovated sixteenth century palace which now served as one of the more fashionable hotels along the Grand Canal. In his room there, he spread a map of Venice open on the double bed and located the Rio di Fontego, one of the city's four hundred canals; and Via Giordano. He traced a water route from there to the Rio San Spirito, where Valconazzi had his hideaway, and saw that the distance was no more than half a mile. If the driver Della Robbia had recruited knew his business, it should take them no longer than thirty minutes to traverse the maze of small *rii* which dotted the area. Figure fifteen minutes to get Valconazzi and his woman into the boat, and another hour or so to get into and out of the Venice lagoon; the boat that would take them to Trieste would be at the rendezvous point in the Adriatic gulf at exactly midnight. It all seemed to dovetail nicely.

Carmody refolded the map, put it away, and made himself a drink from the array of bottles on a silver cart provided by the management. Then he went to the telephone, gave the switchboard a number.

A moment later Valconazzi's thick, atonal voice said guardedly, "Yes? What is it?"

"Carmody. We're set."

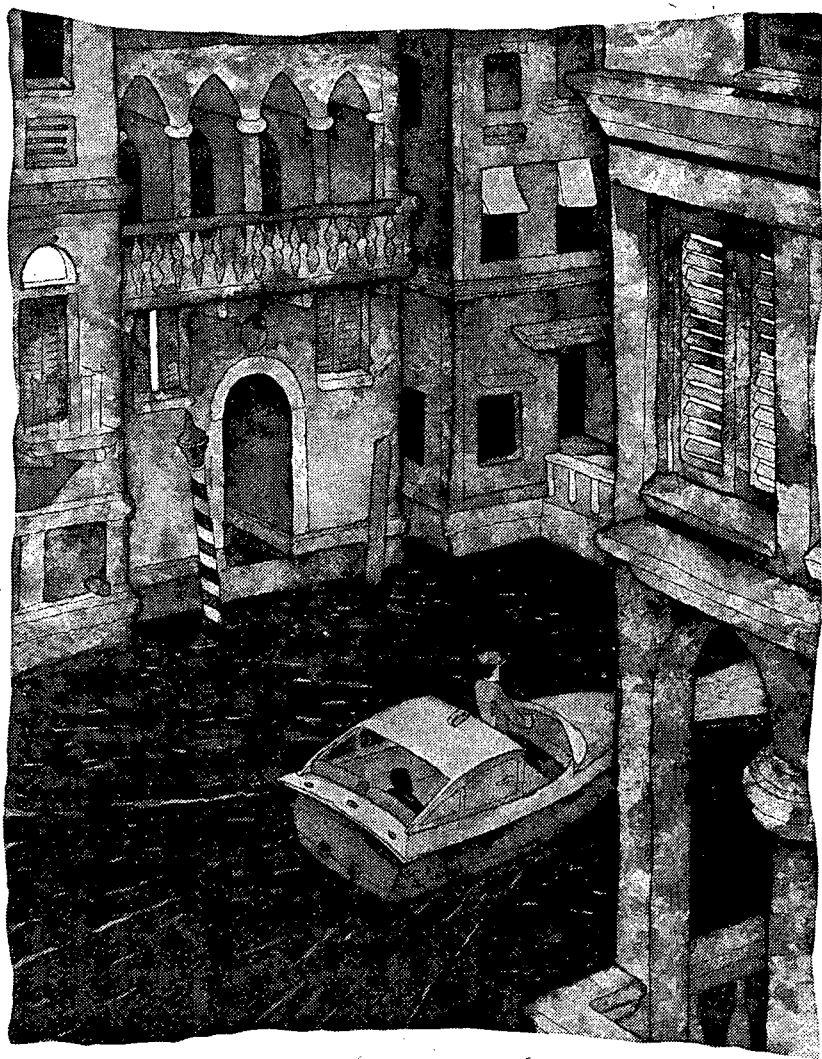
There was an audible expulsion of breath. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight. Be ready at ten thirty."

"I have been ready for the past three days," Valconazzi said. "A man cannot be any more ready than I am."

"Ten thirty," Carmody said again, and rang off.

He went to the bed with his drink and lay down and looked at the high Renaissance ceiling, thinking about Valconazzi and the job that had brought him to Venice four days previously. Valconazzi was, or had been, a smuggler who dealt in the lucrative commodity of cigarettes. The Italian government has a monopoly on the manufacture and sale of all tobacco products, and imposes a high duty on the import of American and English brands. Since most Italians prefer the imported to the raw homemade variety, and the demand grows greater every year, tons of contraband cigarettes are smuggled annually into the country. Valconazzi's operation was one of the largest in the northern provinces. He'd had cigarettes coming into Venice from Trieste, across the gulf, and down from Switzerland—and a fleet of trucks and men to distribute them throughout Italy. Then the Guardia di Finanza,



THE BOAT THAT WOULD TAKE THEM TO TRIESTE WOULD BE AT THE RENDEZVOUS POINT IN THE ADRIATIC GULF AT EXACTLY MIDNIGHT. IT ALL SEEMED TO DOVETAIL NICELY.

the agents of the ministry that runs the monopoly for the government, had descended with a series of recent raids that left Valconazzi's operation hurting and vulnerable.

One of the other dealers, a long-time rival of Valconazzi's named Lambresca, had seen his chance to take over and had made two unsuccessful elimination attempts. With the Guardia di Finanza and the Venice *carabinieri* breathing down his neck on one side, and Lambresca and his group closing in on the other, Valconazzi had been forced to abandon his palatial house on Lido Island, along with most of his possessions, and to go into hiding. Rita, his mistress of several years, had gone with him.

Ordinarily he would have been able to get out of Italy on his own, especially in view of the fact that he had amassed a considerable fortune in smuggling profits which he was able to take with him; but the heat was particularly heavy from both legal and illegal sources, and he had been afraid to trust former friends and allies and afraid to chance any escape routes known to him. That was why he had thought to bring in Carmody.

Carmody was a free-lance bodyguard, a man with connections that reached into every country in the free world—and

some of those behind the Iron Curtain. He had a reputation for results, and for complete trustworthiness that was unequaled by any individual or organization operating in or out of Europe. As a result of that reputation, the always desperate, always well-heeled men and women with whom he dealt were more than willing to pay the somewhat exorbitant fees he charged for his services.

Having heard of Carmody, Valconazzi knew that in order to set up a meeting with him he would have to go through one of Carmody's contacts. The long time contact for Carmody in the Venice area was a man named Piombo—but Piombo had made the mistake a month previously of getting himself shot by the *carabinieri* during an abortive art theft. Valconazzi had, instead, got in touch with Gino Della Robbia, one of Piombo's cohorts and heir-apparent to his contact position.

It had been two months since Carmody had last worked, and prolonged inactivity always made him restless, so he was receptive to the job when Della Robbia contacted him, and had flown directly to Venice. Valconazzi had called him at his hotel to tell him where the hide-away was—he had trusted no one, not even Della Robbia, with its location—and Carmody had

taken a careful, roundabout route to San Spirito. After talking to Valconazzi, and after the receipt of five thousand faith money, he had then gone to work setting up an escape network.

When the three of them arrived in Trieste tonight, there would be a plane to take them first to Spain and then to the island of Sardinia. Undetectably manufactured passports and other necessary papers would be waiting at the port of Cagliari. Once delivered safely there, Valconazzi was on his own; and Carmody would return to his home base on the Mediterranean island of Majorca five figures richer.

Carmody finished his drink, smoked another of the thin, black cigars, and then changed into dark trousers, a dark shirt, and a long leather jacket. He packed his single bag, went downstairs, and checked out of the hotel, leaving the bag in the care of the desk clerk. Then he walked into one of the narrow, carless interior streets, found a restaurant, and ate a leisurely dinner.

At nine o'clock he returned to the hotel, picked up his bag, and went into the lobby restroom. In one of the stalls, he removed the Beretta and the belt half-holster from the bag's false bottom and strapped the rig on under his jacket, where he could get at it

easily with his right hand if the need arose.

He left the hotel again and walked to one of the route stops for the passenger ferries, the Venice equivalent of municipal buses. He rode one up the Grand Canal, which divides the city in half, and disembarked at the stop near the ornately arched Rialto Bridge. After crossing the bridge, he checked the city map he had brought with him and then found his way easily to Via Giordano.

At the foot of the street was a set of stairs leading down into the black, sharply-odored waters of the Rio di Fontego. He waited there in the shadows, watching occasional black gondolas glide past, listening to the faint, pulsing sounds of water traffic on the Grand Canal.

It was one minute past ten when he heard the muffled throb of a boat engine. A moment later the launch—small and radio-equipped, like the water taxis—came along the *rio* and drifted over to the cement seawall. The man standing behind the wheel starboard was short and bearded, wearing a beret and a black turtleneck. He called softly, "Signor?"

Carmody looked back along Via Giordano, saw nothing, and came out of the shadows. Descending the three steps cut into the cement wall, he boarded the

launch and stowed his bag under the front seat. The driver studied him for a moment, then turned to the canal, waiting for instructions.

Carmody said, "Rio San Spirito. Number fifty-two. Can you find it?"

"San Spirito? Yes, I know it."

"Let's go, then."

The darkness was thick and blanketing in the narrow canals through which they maneuvered, and the small red and green running lights on the launch were often the only illumination. Carmody didn't expect company, but he watched astern just to make sure and saw nothing except an occasional wraithlike gondola gliding one way or another, in and out of the maze of waterways. Most of the ancient, decaying buildings along the *rii* were dark; even those that were occupied had shutters drawn across their oblong windows, allowing little light to escape. The silence, broken only by the gentle throb of the launch's inboard engine, was almost oppressive. So was the odor of garbage and salt water on the pleasantly cool, late summer air.

The bearded driver, silent and competent, took the launch through the twisting network of canals at what seemed to Carmody a snail's pace, but it was not even ten thirty when he

brought them into the black mouth of another canal and said, "San Spirito, signor."

"Fine," Carmody said. He looked for familiar landmarks, found one. "It should be the first building on the near side of that bridge ahead."

The driver nodded, cutting power, and eased the launch in close to the unbroken line of brick and cement walls on the right. They neared the small arched bridge that served as a span between two narrow streets, and Carmody pointed out the slender concrete platform beyond number fifty-two. When the launch had edged up to it, he jumped onto the platform.

"Wait here," he said to the driver. "And keep the engine running."

The canal door to the building that was Valconazzi's hideaway was at the near end of the platform, set into the right-angled corner between the *rio* and a high, chinked-brick garden wall. Carmody went to the door and used a corroded brass knocker; it made a hollow sound in the empty black stillness, but he knocked only once.

Valconazzi's voice said immediately, "Si?" He had been standing on the other side of the door, waiting.

"Carmody. Open it up."

There was the sound of a bolt being shot free, and then a key

turned in the old fashioned latch. The door edged inward. Carmody went inside, and Valconazzi was three feet away, with a small, blued-steel revolver in his hand. Behind him, through an archway, the lush brunette Rita stood poised as if for flight.

Carmody said, "Put the iron away," and moved down the short hallway, past Valconazzi and into the dimly lighted room where the girl was. His nostrils contracted, as they had on his previous visit, at the lingering odor of damp decay commingled with the fish and garbage reek penetrating from the canal outside. Three leather suitcases were on the floor next to a worn sofa; one of them—the largest—Carmody knew to contain the run-out money from which he would be paid.

Rita said, "We are leaving now?" in husky, broken English, and her eyes were huge and black in the dark cast of her face. She was tall and broad and enormous-breasted, like a Rubens nude, and if you liked your women that way, as Valconazzi obviously did, she was provocatively appealing. Carmody preferred small, petite women, and to him Rita seemed much too much of a good thing. At the moment she was nervous and either excited or afraid—the way she had seemed to Carmody be-

fore. She could not seem to keep her hands still.

"We're leaving now," he told her. "Let's get the bags out to the boat."

Valconazzi came into the room. Thick-necked and bearish, with a luxuriant black military mustache, he looked more like an Italian army colonel than a criminal on the run. "It seemed as if you would never get here tonight," he said. "This old house groans like an ancient, and I would jump at every sound."

Carmody said nothing, looking impatient, and Valconazzi went immediately to the bags and picked up two of them. Rita took the third, so that Carmody could keep his hands free. He preceded them to the door, opened it, and peered out; the launch sat silently against the concrete platform, the bearded driver standing over the wheel and looking back at the door. Carmody stepped out, motioning Valconazzi and the girl along, and while the suitcases were being handed into the launch and set down astern, he stood slightly apart from the others and looked both ways along the canal.

Rita said suddenly in Italian, "My cosmetic case. I left it inside." She stepped away hurriedly, starting back toward the still-open door to the building.

Her voice had seemed high and nervously shrill in the silence.

"Wait, Rita . . ." Valconazzi began, but she had her back to him, almost to the door now.

In that moment Carmody sensed, rather than saw, the first movement in the shadows beyond the bridge.

The muscles in his stomach constricted and he swept the jacket back and slid the Beretta out of its holster. The shadows seemed to separate, like an amoeba reproducing, and a formless shape edged away from the seawall, coming under the bridge. There was the faint pulsation of a boat engine.

Menace crackled like electricity on the cool night air, and Carmody shouted, "Valconazzi! Get down!" He dropped to one knee, sighting at the moving outline of the boat as it drew nearer, and fired twice. He heard bullets slap wood somewhere on the craft, and then a man-shape reared up at the wheel and the night seemed to explode in bright flashes, in chattering sound.

Valconazzi, startled by Carmody's sudden warning, had failed to react immediately. Now he screamed and wrapped both hands across his stomach, turned in a half-circle, and fell heavily into the launch's stern. In the same instant the bearded driver jerked straight up, hands outstretched as if imploring; then

he toppled sideways out of sight. Bullets sprayed the garden wall at the rear of the platform, whined off the concrete, thudded into the wooden hull of the launch.

Carmody thought: *Thompson gun*—and threw himself forward into the canal.

The water was chill and black, and he could taste the pollution of it, the harshness of oil and fish and garbage. He fought to keep from gagging and kicked straight down, at an angle across the narrow width of the *rio*. The Beretta was still in his hand, and he shoved it inside the waistband of his slacks before struggling out of the binding leather jacket. Swimming blind, groping ahead of him for the wall on the far side, he could feel pressure mounting rapidly in his lungs. Finally his fingers came in contact with the rough surface, and he crawled upward along it and poked his head out of the water, dragging air through his mouth, looking back.

The ambush boat had drawn alongside the launch, and the dark form of the machine gunner was frantically transferring Valconazzi's suitcases into his own craft with one hand, still holding the Thompson gun with the other. A long way off, somebody was shouting. There was intermittent light along the canal now, but not enough for

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Carmody to determine if the boat held more than one man.

The machine gunner pulled the last suitcase aboard. Turning, he saw Carmody along the far wall, and the automatic weapon came up to his shoulder and began to chatter yellowly again. Chips of plaster and stone flew outward as the slugs scarred the wall, but Carmody was already beneath the canal's surface again, diving deeply and kicking straight across.

Above him, then, he heard the boat's engine grow abruptly loud, and he knew that the gunner was not wasting any more time, not with the area soon to be swarming with police craft. When he found the seawall and crawled up along it as he had done on the other side, the ambush boat was a dark blob just swinging out of San Spirito into another canal.

There were more lights on in nearby buildings; people with their heads pushed curiously between partially-opened shutters. Carmody swam to the launch, caught the port gunwale, and hauled himself into the craft. Valconazzi had been stitched across the abdomen with half a dozen bullets; the driver had been shot twice in the throat. The deck of the launch was slick with spilled blood.

Impotent rage made Carmody's temples throb wildly,

and his green eyes glowed like a cat's in the darkness. He looked under the front seat and saw that his own suitcase was still there. He pushed it onto the platform, climbed up after it, and ran with it to the door of number fifty-two. Inside, he went through the three downstairs rooms and two upstairs; the house was empty.

The woman, Rita, was gone.

Lips pulled back wolfishly from his teeth, Carmody went out a side door into a garden grown wild with lavender wisteria and white oleander. The windows of an adjacent building looked down into it, and a fat man in an undershirt stood framed in one, shouting angrily. Several large chestnut trees grew in the garden's center, and Carmody stayed in their shadow until he found a gate opening onto one of the narrow, twisting *calli* that mazed the area in much the same manner as the canals. He yanked it wide.

As he came running through the gate, a tall youth materialized from the darkness in front of him, waving his arms. Carmody lowered his shoulder and barreled into the youth and sent him sprawling against the garden wall. A woman's voice began cursing querulously in Italian some distance away. Carmody ran to the first corner, turned it into another street,

ran another block, rounded another corner and came out in a *campiello* with a small stone statue in its center.

He ducked around the statue and went into a slender black alley on the opposite side of the square. With his back against the cold stone wall, he watched the *campiello*. No one came into it, but he stayed where he was for several minutes, catching his breath, shivering inside his wet clothing. Then he moved deeper into the blackness, set his bag down, and worked the catches to open it.

Rita, he was thinking, *it had to have been Rita*. In addition to himself, the woman and Valconazzi were the only ones who knew about the San Spirito hideaway; and she had gone back to the house, out of the way, immediately before the shooting started. The way it figured, she had used the telephone in the house, when Valconazzi was in another of the rooms, and had tipped Lambresca—the smuggling rival who wanted Valconazzi's blood. Lambresca had told her how it would be done, about the ambush, and then he had sent his machine gunner to do the job. Her motivation was obvious enough: Valconazzi's run-out money—and maybe some personal reason, as well, that Carmody could not know about. In

any case, the money had to have been a primary consideration; the gunner had taken the time to fish the three suitcases out of the launch before getting the hell away from San Spirito.

Why had Rita done it that way? Why not just put a knife in Valconazzi at the house and simply walk out with the money? Or tip Lambresca off days sooner; they had been in the house for two weeks. Well, there were several possible explanations: she wasn't capable of committing murder herself; it had taken her the full two weeks to work up enough courage for the double-cross; Valconazzi had the money hidden in a place only he knew about. Whatever the reason, Rita was the Judas, all right . . .

While all of this was going through his mind, Carmody changed clothes in the darkness, putting on the jacket and shirt and slacks he had worn earlier in the day. The sodden things went into the suitcase, rolled into a towel. Then he left the alley and walked around until he found a neighborhood bar.

Locking himself in the restroom, he broke down the Beretta and cleaned and oiled it with materials from the false bottom of his bag. When he was satisfied that it was in working order, he moved out into the bar proper and drank two cognacs

to get the taste of the canal water out of his mouth.

There was a telephone on a rear wall. Carmody dialed Della Robbia's number, and the receiver was lifted on the sixth ring. He said, "Carmody. We had trouble. The whole thing's blown."

Silence; then Della Robbia said, "What happened?"

"We were ambushed. Valconazzi is dead. So's your launch driver. They were laying for us in a boat—one man with a machine gun that I'm sure about, maybe a backup. It was too dark to see much."

Della Robbia released a soft breath. "What about you?" he asked. "You are all right, signor?"

"Rum dandy," Carmody said. He was holding the phone receiver as if it were the machine gunner's neck. "Listen, it figures Valconazzi's woman is mixed up in the hit. She ducked off just before we were ambushed."

"But why would she—"

Carmody said, "I don't have all the answers yet, that's what I need you for. What do you know about this Rita?"

"Very little, signor."

"Was she ever involved in any way with a guy called Lambresca?"

"Valconazzi's rival? No, signor, not that I am aware. Do you

believe Lambresca helped arrange the ambush? That it was he and the woman?"

"That's right. Where do I find him, Della Robbia?"

"He has a wholesale vegetable dealership on Campo Orogliia, with living quarters above it. But, signor—"

"Get to work on the woman," Carmody said. "Dig me up a lead, use your connections. If I can't get anything out of Lambresca, I've got to have a starting point, some kind of direction. She's not going to get out of Venice—no way, you hear? Valconazzi is the first customer I ever lost, and I don't like it and I won't stand for it. I can't run my business letting somebody set up a customer and get away with it. Now get busy, and no nonsense."

"Just as you say," Della Robbia agreed hurriedly. "Where are you? Where can I—"

"I'll be in touch," Carmody said, and slapped the handset into its cradle.

There was nobody home.

Carmody stepped out from under the doorway arch and looked up once again at the sign running across the top of the closed front of the warehouse. It said A. LAMBRESCA in thick black lettering, and below that CAMPO OROGLIA 24. He let his gaze drift higher, to the barren eyes of the

windows strung along the second floor front. No sign of life. He had been there for five minutes, ringing bells and making noises like a drunk, his fingers restless on the butt of the Beretta in his jacket pocket. There had been no response of any kind, and it seemed obvious now that Lambresca was somewhere else on this night.

Out taking care of Rita, Carmody thought. Paying her off—or maybe double crossing her the way she double crossed Valconazzi, so he can keep the money for himself.

He looked at his watch; almost one thirty. The night was deep and silent, and there was a hollow, lonely echo to his steps as he crossed the square to enter the same street by which he had arrived. The rage inside him was thinly contained, screaming for an outlet.

He located a small hotel, gave the clerk a thousand lire note for the use of the telephone. Della Robbia answered almost immediately. Carmody said, "Well?"

"I have learned something," Della Robbia said, "but perhaps it means little or nothing."

"I'll decide that. What is it?"

"The woman has an uncle, a man named Salviati, who owns a *squero*—a boatyard for the repair and construction of gondolas. The uncle is said to have

smuggled contraband in the past, and so has several boats of high speed at his disposal. It is possible the woman has gone there, either because she wishes to leave the city or because she wishes to hide."

Carmody gave it some thought. It was possible, all right. Assuming it was the money that had prompted Rita to sell out Valconazzi, she might have gotten her payoff and made straight for her uncle's, for one of the two reasons Della Robbia had just suggested. She would need someone she could trust, and Lambresca was not necessarily that someone. Or she could have gone there immediately after leaving San Spirito, be waiting there now for Lambresca to bring the money.

He asked, "Where is this place, this *squero*?"

"On the Rio degli Zecchini. A water taxi can take you nearby, if you can find one at this hour of night."

"I can find one," Carmody said.

From where he stood in the shadows across the Rio degli Zecchini, Carmody could see the vague black shapes and skeletons of gondolas in the *squero*'s low-fenced rear yard. Set back fifty feet from the waterway was a two story wood and brick building that looked as if it had

been constructed in the time of the doges. It was completely dark. The area itself was relatively deserted, containing mostly warehouses. No light showed anywhere in the vicinity, save for a distant streetlamp beyond a bridge spanning the canal twenty yards to the left of Carmody's vantage point.

He put his suitcase into a shadowed wall niche, took the Beretta out of his jacket pocket—the sodden holster was in the bag—and held it cupped low against his right leg as he walked slowly to the bridge. On the opposite seawall, he stood listening for a moment. A ship's horn bayed mournfully out on the lagoon, but the interruption was only momentary in the dark, late night stillness.

The rear entrance to the *squero* was a wooden gate set into a three-quarter frame of two by fours; the other quarter was the brick wall of the adjacent building. On the canal side, and on top, the beams sprouted tangles of barbed wire like whiskers on an old man. Carmody had had experience with barbed wire before, but still he cut the palm of his left hand in two places while swinging in a humped, acrobatic position around the frame. The sharp sting of the cuts added fuel to the already white heat of his anger.

Moving quickly now, he made

his way across the yard, made ghostly by a faint shine from the half-moon overhead. The gondolas—long, slender, flat-bottomed, with tapered and upswept prow and stern—were laid out in rows, on davits, in stacks of two and three; they camouflaged his run to the far corner of the darkened wood and brick building.

Jalousied shutters were lowered tightly across a high, double-doored entrance, and there were no fronting windows. Carmody edged around the corner and along the side wall. An elongated window halfway down looked in on a solid screen of blackness—another dead end.

Carmody paused, peering toward the back. A high wall formed the rear boundary of the *squero*, but it was set several feet beyond the building, forming a narrow alley the width of it. He decided to make a complete circle of the structure before abandoning the grounds.

The rear passageway was cluttered with refuse. He picked his way carefully through it, looking for a window. Two-thirds of the width, he found one with louvered shutters closed across it. He went to it and squinted upward through one of the canted louvers: light; movement.

The muscles in Carmody's neck went taut, and he bent lower so that he could see more

of the room. It was an office of sorts. There was a desk containing a farrago of miscellany and a lighted gooseneck lamp, two wooden chairs, a table overflowing with charts and pamphlets, a filing cabinet with a rusted fan on top.

There was also the woman, Rita.

She stood to one side of the desk, in profile, nervously watching the closed door directly opposite the window. Her arms were folded tightly across her heavy breasts, as if she were cold, and she smoked a filter cigarette in short, agitated drags. Beneath the olive tone of her skin, her face appeared to be very pale.

Carmody retreated, his mouth a thin white slash. He went back the way he had come and stopped before the elongated and unshuttered window that looked into the front part of the building. It was the kind that open inward on a pair of hinges, with a simple slip catch locking it into the jamb. He went to work with the broad, flat blade of his pocketknife. After two minutes of silent, concentrated effort, he put the tips of his fingers against the streaked glass and cautiously pushed the window open.

The interior smelled of paint and linseed oil and dampness. Once inside, Carmody stood motionless on a rough concrete

floor, waiting for his eyes to become acclimated to the deep blackness; pretty soon he was able to identify a lathe, a drill press, a table saw, several wood forms. The wall that would contain the office door was in heavy shadow, but he knew approximately where the opening would be and he moved stealthily in that direction.

When he was ten feet away, he could make out the lines of the door. He stepped up to it, listening. She was quiet in there, and since she had been watching the door minutes earlier, it figured she was still watching it. He had no way of knowing whether or not she was armed; he had not seen a gun, but he had only had a limited view of the office. The door might be locked, too; but the wood was old and very dry; it would not take very long to kick it in. The element of surprise was all in his favor.

Carmody touched his left hand to the knob. Then, when he was ready, he twisted it hard to the right, moving his body forward. The door, unlocked, opened under his hand and he hit it with his left shoulder, bursting it wide, and went in very fast with the Beretta up and his body dipped into a fighter's crouch.

Rita screamed.

She stumbled backward, one hand going to her mouth, and

her eyes were like buttons threatening to pop from too much pressure. Carmody reached her in three long strides, caught her dark hair in his free hand, spun her around, and sat her down hard in one of the chairs. Immediately, he knelt in front of her and put the muzzle of the Beretta against her cheek, his tightly angry face less than six inches from hers.

He could see that she wanted to scream again, but there was no voice left in her. Her eyes began to roll up in their sockets. Carmody slapped her twice and her vision abruptly refocused, and she was out of the faint before she had really gone into it.

She stared at him with terrified shock. "Signor Carmody

"That's right—Carmody."

"But you . . . I thought . . ."

"I was luckier than Valconazzi," he said softly, thinly. "Have you been paid off yet, Rita? Where's the money?"

"Money? I have . . . no money. Please . . ."

"Come on, come on, you sold me out too when you sold out Valconazzi. Remember that."

"I do not understand—"

"The hell you don't understand."

"I was so afraid," she whispered. She was trembling now. "I did not wish to die. This is why I run away. I know nothing

about money, please, I know nothing!"

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't set up that ambush?"

"Ambush?"

"The boat, the machine gunner."

"No! How could I? You cannot think—"

"Why did you run back to the house just before the shooting started?"

"My *cosmeticos*. I forget them."

"Sure you did."

"I tell the truth! Renzo was my man, we were going away together, you cannot think I would see him killed."

"Somebody saw him killed," Carmody said. "Somebody tipped Lambresca. And you and Valconazzi were the only ones besides me who knew where that hideaway was."

"No, no, no! I did not, I would not . . ."

She shook her head wildly, forgetting the gun at her cheek, and Carmody pulled the Beretta back slightly. It was momentarily silent in the office, and in that silence there was the sibilant but unmistakable sound of a footfall from the darkness at the front of the building. The hackles rose on the back of Carmody's neck, and out of the corner of his eye he could see the vague form of a man just outside the pool of light shining out through the open doorway. There

was something large and bulky held in both the man's hands, across the front of his body.

Carmody levered up in one fluid motion and threw himself to one side, pushing Rita and the chair over backward. She screamed again, thin and piercing, but it was a cry of fear rather than pain—a cry that was lost almost instantly in the stuttering roar of the Thompson gun. One of the sprayed bullets ripped the gooseneck lamp off the desk top and flung it down; the light went out and the office was plunged into total darkness, save for the bright flashes from the machine gun's muzzle.

Rolling frantically, Carmody managed to get the desk between himself and the doorway. He could hear the rap, rap, rap of the slugs digging into the desk, into the wall above him, as the gunner raked the enclosure with another burst. He twisted his body into the knee-hole, lying flat, and he could see, then, the muzzle flashes of the Thompson gun.

He steadied the Beretta on his left forearm and emptied most of the clip at a spot six inches above the bursts.

There was a half-strangled Italian oath, and abruptly the automatic weapon became silent; a moment later the metallic clatter of the machine gun on concrete and the sound of a

heavily falling body reached Carmody's ears. He remained motionless for several pulse-beats, but the only thing auditory in the heavy darkness was Rita's soft whimpering somewhere across the office.

Carmody crawled out of the knee-hole, got to his feet, and moved at an angle to the door. There was a pencil flash in his trouser pocket, one he had taken from his suitcase after the unwanted swim in Rio San Spirito. He got it out and held it up toward the spot where he had heard the man fall, touching the button. A thin beam came on and he could see him out there, lying crumpled at the foot of the drill press with the machine gun on the floor two yards behind him.

For the first time, Carmody allowed his knotted muscles to relax. He swung the light back inside the room and shone it on Rita momentarily; she blinked against its glare, turning her face into her hands, but he could see that she was unhurt. He went out into the work area and turned the gunner over with the toe of one shoe and put the light on his face.

It was Della Robbia.

Blood welled from two holes high on his chest, but he was still alive and breathing raggedly. His eyes were squeezed shut in pain. Carmody swore

softly and fought down a fresh surge of fury. He was not as surprised as he might have been—he had begun to believe Rita's protestations of innocence in the office prior to the shooting—but that did not make the treachery of a man he had trusted any easier to take. Della Robbia, sure, it figured. A lot of things began to figure now.

A light went on behind him, in the office; Rita had found another lamp somewhere. She stood looking out at him for a moment, and then started forward, her movements weak-kneed and jerky. She stopped several paces away, staring down. "It is Della Robbia," she said incredulously. "Yeah."

"He tried to kill us?"

"Twice," Carmody said.

"I do not understand . . ."

"It's simple enough. He's the one who ambushed us on San Spirito tonight—not Lambresca. Lambresca had nothing to do with any of this; he was just a convenient scapegoat for all concerned."

"But why? Why would he do this?"

"For the money—the same reason I thought you'd sold out Valconazzi. He didn't know how much there would be, but he did know that it would be plenty."

She shook her head in a child-like way.

Carmody said, "Della Robbia

got you to come here tonight, didn't he?"

A convulsive nod answered him.

"You contacted him after you left San Spirito?"

"Yes. I went to his home. I thought you and Renzo were . . . dead. I had nowhere else to go."

"And then he sent you here."

"Yes. He gave me a key and said I was to wait in the office. He told me this was the *squero* of a friend."

"What were you supposed to wait for?"

"For him to come. He promised to help me leave Venezia."

Carmody moved his head slowly up and down. The pattern was almost complete now. If Della Robbia had been able to accomplish it, he would have got Carmody alone after that first telephone call—he must have just arrived home from San Spirito when the call came—and tried to kill him then. But Carmody had talked fast and angrily, not revealing his whereabouts, and Della Robbia had been afraid to force the issue; there had been nothing he could do except to sweat and wait for the next call and hope that Carmody learned nothing in the meantime. Then Rita had shown up on his doorstep: fate playing in his corner, giving him a golden second chance—or so he'd have

thought. He sent the girl here to the *squero*, waited for Carmody to ring up again, and made sure then that he would come too by fabricating the story about Rita's uncle. Della Robbia would have left immediately afterward and come straight here, arriving before Carmody or at least in time to see him enter the grounds; and then he had used a second key to come in silently with the machine gun in hand . . .

On the floor Della Robbia made a choking sound, and Carmody looked down at him. The eyes were open now, and the lips worked soundlessly, groping for words. When he finally found them, they were surprisingly clear. "You are a cat, Signor Carmody, a cat with many lives. I should have killed you twice tonight. I am most . . . sorry I did not." He made a sound that was both a laugh and a liquid cough. "I would do it all again, do you know this? For the fortune Valconazzi carried, I would gladly do it all again."

"Yes?" Carmody said tonelessly. "Well, all right, how did you find out where the hide-away was? Valconazzi didn't tell you and I didn't tell you. The launch wasn't followed tonight, I made sure of that—and when I went out to San Spirito three days ago, I made sure I wasn't followed then, either."

Della Robbia coughed again, and it was very close to being a death-rattle; he did not have much more time. He said, "A clever means, signor. The launch . . . was equipped with a shortwave radio. I instructed the driver to open the microphone just before he . . . picked you up, so that when you told him where . . . you would go, I could hear your instructions on my . . . own boat's radio. I did not tell him . . . the reason for this, but he had to die nonetheless . . ."

A tic made the corner of Carmody's mouth twitch slightly. "Where's the money, Della Robbia?"

"My house . . . bedroom closet . . . no point in lying, you would find it . . . you are a cat, signor . . . a cat . . ."

There were more words, but they were lost in a spasm of fluid coughing. Then, all at once, the coughing stopped and the life force was gone from Della Robbia's eyes and he lay still on the cold concrete floor. Carmody turned away.

Rita said, "He is . . . dead?"

Carmody nodded, took the woman's arm. "Come on, it's time we got out of here."

"Where are we to go?"

"To pick up Valconazzi's money. Hell, *your* money. You've earned the right to it. All I want

is the fee Valconazzi and I agreed on."

She shook her head in that childlike way again. "And then?"

"I do the job I was hired for," Carmody said. "It might take another day or two to rearrange

things, but I'll find a place for us to do the waiting. It won't be too bad."

She looked at him with her large dark eyes. "No," she said, "I do not think it will be bad at all."

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HRKC-2

The Angler

by Jack Ritchie

I was his lawyer and I wondered how he could pay for my services. True, he had a half million dollars, but he wouldn't tell anybody where it was, and besides, it was quite hot.

"There's at least one thing in your favor," I said. "You released the boy unharmed."

Eddie Ripley shrugged. "Never touched a hair of his head. I was going to let him go after a while even if his father didn't come across with the ransom. Why would I want to hurt a kid? I like kids."

Two weeks ago, Eddie had kidnapped twelve-year-old Frankie Sorrenson and demanded and gotten five hundred thousand dollars. When the police caught him, they had found no money on him or in his vicinity and he refused to tell them where he had hidden it.

"I think the kid enjoyed the whole thing," Eddie said. "I got him all the comic books he wanted, he had my portable TV, and no school. He probably gained a couple of pounds while he was with me because I fed him real good. Ice cream, pop, hamburgers. The whole bit."

"What about the father?" I asked. "Do you suppose he enjoyed the entire incident too?"

Eddie snorted. "The kid told me plenty. His old man hardly knew he was alive. Frankie's been with nursemaids and stuff like that since his mother died, when he was two."

Frankie's father, Gus Sorrenson, controlled the state's largest construction company and also, it was generally agreed, a considerable number of county supervisors. Consequently our state is laced with his highways, a great number of which seem to be superfluous.

When his son was kidnapped, he had immediately announced that he would not be intimidated. He would refuse to pay the ransom. If he yielded to the kidnapper's demand, it would only encourage other kidnappers across the country.

Ten percent of our population applauded his courageous stand. The other ninety percent wrote letters to newspapers intimating

a certain heartlessness on his part. After ten days—and considerable negative publicity—he capitulated and paid the ransom.

Eddie Ripley brushed back his prematurely gray hair. "You know why I hired you? Because you got a reputation. I hear they tried to disbar you three times."

"Misunderstandings," I said. "No one could prove a thing." I changed the subject. "There is still the question of the ransom money. The police haven't found it and apparently you have no intention of telling them where to look."

"That's right."

I shook my head. "Eddie, you'll never get a chance to spend a cent of it. No matter what I do for you, you're a cinch to get at least life imprisonment."

He grinned. "I'll be eligible for parole in twelve years and eight months."

"Forget the parole. Do you think any parole board is going to turn you loose if that five hundred thousand is still missing?"

Eddie shrugged. "I guess not. So I'll play it cool for three, four years. Put in good time until I get out of maximum security. I broke out of the pen twice before, you know."

Ripley was certainly an optimist. Yet it was quite true that he had, in his career, escaped from state confinement two times. "The police have the serial numbers of all those bills. And probably the money is marked in other ways, too. If you try spending it, even ten or fifteen years from now, you'll be nailed in a week."

He agreed. "But I know where to get rid of it."

"At an eighty or ninety percent discount?"

"No. Dollar for dollar. Or nearly so."

"A Swiss bank? Things aren't quite what they were, Eddie. They wouldn't take a cent of it."

"Not a Swiss bank. I mean one of those islands in the Caribbean that are all turning into republics. What holds them together is the tourist business and the world banks that suddenly open branch offices there. Them banks don't give a damn where the money comes from, just so they get it. They know how to launder it and get it back into circulation on the other side of the world with only a small discount."

He leaned a bit closer. "I was going to take it there myself, but something went sour with the caper and right away the cops were looking for me. I didn't stand a chance of getting out of the country. So I buried the money. In five places."

"Five places? Why five places?"

"Because I don't trust nobody. I put a hundred thousand in each hole." He smiled. "Do you know anybody who'd like to make a hundred thousand easy?"

I coughed slightly and waited.

He lowered his voice, though it was not necessary. We were alone in the small room at police headquarters. "Suppose I tell somebody where one of those holes is? And suppose this somebody took the money he found there to one of them islands and deposited eighty thousand dollars in a bank where I could get at it when I was ready and he could deposit twenty thousand in his own name. And suppose he came back with the proof that he done just that? Then I guess I'd tell him where to find the second hole, and so forth, until we run out of holes."

I listened to my thoughts for a moment. "Why not tell this person where *all* of the holes are? It would save a lot of traveling back and forth to the island."

He smiled again. "Because I wouldn't trust this person as far as I could throw a lead habeas corpus. He'd probably take off with the whole half million and leave me with nothing but tears."

I displayed an understanding nod. "Suppose this unmentioned person should take off with *all* of the hundred thousand he found in the first hole? He could save himself five trips to the island, and a hundred thousand one way appears to be as good as a hundred thousand another."

"Because if he did that, I'd blow the whistle on him. I'd tell the cops he's got some of the ransom money. I might even say that he was my accomplice. But if he does things my way, the hundred thou he ends up with is clean and spendable. Nobody knows where or how he got it."

I diddled with the clasp of my briefcase for a few moments. "The unnamed person in question will need a little time to think over the proposition. And to see if it can be done."

When I left Eddie, I stopped in at the district attorney's office and talked to Assistant D.A. Porter, who would handle the prosecution.

He did not overwhelm me with hospitality. "Is Ripley going to tell us where to find the money?"

I took an unoffered chair. "Not yet, at least. I suppose you've done some searching?"

"Every place we could think of. He probably buried it somewhere, and this is a big country."

"You went over his apartment?"

"Of course. We even looked up his ex-wife."

"Ex-wife?"

"Yeah. They've been divorced over five years, but you never can tell. For five hundred thousand they might get together for one hit. But nothing turned up. She even volunteered for a lie detector test. Our graph man says she doesn't know anything about the kidnapping or the money. She says she never sees Eddie more than a few minutes when he comes to pick up the kid on Sunday afternoons."

"The kid?"

"He has a boy about the same age as the Sorrenson kid. He gets to keep his son two weeks in the summer, too. All part of the divorce arrangement. His ex-wife says Eddie wasn't much of a husband, but he's crazy about his kid."

Early the next morning, Gus Sorrenson appeared at my office. He's a heavy man with small eyes that glared at me. "So you're defending the kidnapper of my son?"

I corrected him. "I am defending the *alleged* kidnapper of your son."

He brushed that off. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here?"

"Naturally."

"I might as well get right to the point. I understand that this Ripley character has refused to turn the ransom money over to the police."

"Quite true."

Sorrenson sputtered. "What the hell good will the money do him now? He's not going to be in circulation again for a long, long time, if ever. His only chance for a parole is to turn over the money right now."

"I pointed that out to him. But he wants to hang on to it anyway. Maybe the thought of still having it will keep him warm in the dismal years ahead."

Sorrenson glowered. "I had a hell of a time raising that cash. A hell of a time. Had to turn in bonds. Sign notes. The cops swore up and down that I'd get it all back. Every cent of it."

"Obviously they were wrong."

He leaned forward. "Let's not beat around the bush. I know when to cut my losses. I'm ready to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"That's right. If Ripley turns over four hundred thousand of that money, I'll let him keep the rest."

"I don't quite see what he has to gain by that."

"Look, I'll tell the police that I got *all* of the ransom back. That way the hundred thousand Ripley keeps will be clean. Nobody will be looking for the bills. Hell, he could have it invested for him, and it could double or triple by the time he's eligible for parole. He'll be a rich man when he gets out."

Sorrenson managed a wink. "I don't care how the two of you decide to split the hundred grand. Fifty-fifty, or whatever you think is fair to your client."

I mulled it over. It was true that if I went along with Ripley, I would wind up with a big hundred thousand. But there was always the possibility that something might go wrong and I would inherit more trouble than I could possibly handle.

Doing things Sorrenson's way, I'd manage maybe only fifty grand, but it would put me on the side of the angels—which was considerably safer.

I smiled. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Sorrenson, I'll see what I can do."

The next morning, I put the offer to Ripley—or at least my version of it. "So Sorrenson will let you keep fifty grand of the ransom money, if you return the rest. It will be a clean fifty grand, Eddie. Just lying there in a bank and making money for you to spend when you get out. And you'll undoubtedly get that parole when you become eligible."

Eddie wasn't buying. "Hell, no."

I cleared my throat. "I just might be able to get Sorrenson to up the offer to sixty grand." I watched his face hopefully. "Maybe even sixty-five. But that's the absolute limit, Eddie. I don't think he'll go for more."

Ripley glared. "Not for fifty grand, a hundred grand, or two hundred grand. I'm going to wind up with four hundred grand and not a cent less." He studied me as though he had decided to get himself another lawyer. "And somebody else is going to pocket a hundred thousand, but I haven't decided who yet."

"Good," I said quickly. "Good."

He frowned. "Good what?"

"I mean I am considerably happy that you turned down Sorrenson's offer. I was hoping you would. Really, Eddie. But I had to pass it on to you. That's ethics, Eddie—to let you decide for yourself

what you want to do. You made a wise decision. A wise decision." I shifted a little in the hard wooden chair. "About depositing that first hundred grand, Eddie. Don't you think we ought to begin just about now?"

He remained dubious. "Not yet. I got to know you a little better."

That night in my apartment I made myself a long drink. I wasn't too enthusiastic about five island trips. Not that I didn't think Ripley's plan would work, but there was always that element of risk in handling hot money.

Then I brightened.

Suppose that after I told Sorrenson that Ripley had turned down his offer cold, I mentioned Ripley's counter-offer to me—the hundred thousand in each pot thing. And I would suggest that I *pretend* to go along with Ripley. For a cut of a hundred thousand, of course. It was the only way Sorrenson could expect to get his money back.

Sorrenson and I could even get police cooperation. They could manufacture the bankbook or whatever Ripley required as proof that his money was being put into the island banks.

My apartment door buzzer sounded.

I opened the door and stared into the face of a burly man wearing a black domino mask. He held a blued automatic in his gloved hand.

I backed up, as directed by the gesture of the gun. He entered and closed the door behind him.

His hair was quite flaming red, and he had an inch-long scar on the left side of his cleft chin.

He spoke. "I read about you in the papers. You're Eddie Ripley's lawyer, right?"

Was it best to admit or deny it? Which did he want? "Well, at the present moment, I am. However, if there should be any objection from anyone . . ."

"You get to see him whenever you want to?"

"Yes. So far, at least."

He seemed satisfied. "Relax. I'm not after you. I hear he's still holding onto that half million."

I nodded.

The redhaired man sat down. His gloved left hand fished a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He lit up from a book of matches. "I want that five hundred grand," he said. "All of it."

"I assume you expect to get it. Why?"

"Because I got Eddie Ripley's son."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

He exhaled smoke. "What Eddie can do, I can do. So Ripley kidnapped the Sorrenson kid and got five hundred grand, and now I kidnap Eddie's kid and I expect to get five hundred grand, too. From Ripley. I come here because you get in to see Eddie regular and can communicate."

I blinked. Kidnapping a kidnapper's son somehow just didn't seem cricket. Yet, apparently it had been done.

The redhaired man continued. "This whole thing is just between you and me and Eddie. I don't want nobody running to the police."

I was still in a bit of shock. "What about the boy's mother? Won't she bring in the police?"

"No," he said emphatically. "I impressed on her that I would send back the kid piece by piece if she did. Starting with the left ear."

I shuddered. This creature wanted the *entire* five hundred thousand? Utterly unreasonable. Perhaps something could be salvaged for later distribution between me and Sorrenson.

"Eddie might love his son," I said. "But five hundred thousand dollars' worth?" I chuckled. "You and I, sir, are reasonable men. Eddie's love undoubtedly has its limit, which I would estimate at a hundred thousand. Even then, I feel sure it would be like pulling teeth."

He smiled. "Speaking of teeth, I'll send those back too, one by one, after I run out of ears. I want the whole five hundred grand or it's D-Day for the kid."

D-Day? Dismemberment Day? Clearly the man was a monster. One cannot haggle with monsters, and yet . . .

I cleared my throat. "Of course you realize that this money is all marked. Attempting to spend it will be hazardous to your health. However—for a slight consideration—I could suggest a place where—"

He interrupted. "I know where to launder the money. And I'll be getting a suntan and drinking rum and cola when I do."

So he knew about those island banks? Damn.

I needed time to think, to plan something else that would not leave my pockets empty. "Assuming that Ripley will agree to pay the ransom, there will still be some difficulty in gathering all of the money together. Eddie has buried it in five different places. He hasn't told me where, of course, but I gather that the spots are far

apart. I might have to do considerable traveling to assemble the entire amount. It might take weeks."

"You got one week," he said. "One week or I buy myself stamps and start mailing things."

"How will I get in touch with you?"

"I'll do the touching. By phone."

When he left, I bolted the door.

Carefully I retrieved the matchbook he'd left behind, handling it only by its edges.

It was a typical twenty-match pack, advertising a national chain of supermarkets on the cover, but twelve of the matches had been used. The redhaired man had worn gloves when he lit up here, but I doubted that he had worn gloves when he had used the pack in lighting any of those other missing matches.

I slipped it into an envelope and drove to the suburban home of Sergeant Ben Luther.

Luther appeared at the door in slippers, carrying a can of beer. He smiled when he saw me. It meant business for him—unofficial business for which he expected to be paid.

I handed him the envelope. "There's a pack of matches in there. I want it gone over for fingerprints, and I want to find out who they belong to."

"How do you know he's been printed anywhere?"

"I don't. But try anyway."

He took the envelope. "I'm not in fingerprints, and it's not so easy to ask favors like that at headquarters. I might have to lay out a few bucks here and there, but I think fifty will cover it."

Sheer robbery, of course, but I handed him five tens. "I want a rush job. Call me as soon as you get anything."

I went to see Eddie Ripley early the next morning. He paled when I told him about the kidnapping of his son.

"My advice to you," I said, "is to offer him a hundred thousand. There's no point in shooting the whole works if we . . . if *you* don't have to."

Eddie did not agree at all. "This is nothing to dicker about. The kid could get killed. Give the man the whole damn five hundred grand. I'm beginning to think I never would get to spend it anyhow. They're making jails a lot tighter than they used to."

He wagged a warning finger at me. "If anything happens to that kid, I'm holding you personally responsible. And if you try to take

off and leave that kid in the lurch, I swear I'll get out and kill you, no matter where you run."

"My dear sir," I said indignantly. "The boy's welfare is my concern, too. I could not rest another night if he were harmed in any manner."

Ripley proceeded to reveal to me where he had hidden the money. He had memorized the directions, of course, but they were quite complicated and it was necessary for me to put them down on paper. Each cache was located in a lightly populated rural area where there was little danger of anyone's questioning why you were digging.

It required two days for me to find and dig up all of the money.

When I reached my apartment, I bolted the door and spread the currency on my dining room table. I counted it. Yes, it was all there. Exactly five hundred thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills.

I found my pulse pounding as I stared at the stacks of money—all of it ripe for the taking.

Was it worthwhile becoming a fugitive for five hundred thousand dollars? Was it worthwhile giving up my present identity, my contacts, my practice?

I rubbed my neck. Actually I do very little repeat business. My clients seem to feel that dealing with me once is quite enough.

Was it worthwhile giving up all the things I had here for five hundred thousand dollars uneroded by income taxes?

Frankly, yes.

I sighed heavily. Unfortunately my lack of conscience contained an Achilles heel—I entertain a certain respect for the lives of children. Money was one thing, but I could not live with the responsibility of a boy's death, especially if it were accomplished ear by ear, tooth by tooth, and whatever.

My phone rang.

It was Sergeant Luther. "There were two pretty good prints on the matchbook. Thumb and forefinger, and we had them in the local files. Your man is Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider. Six foot, two hundred pounds. Scar on cleft chin. Red hair. His record shows armed robbery. Been put away twice. Right now he's out on parole."

"I know."

"He lives right here in the city—167 North Bark Street."

When I hung up, my mind churned once again. Perhaps I had another angle to work on.

Ripley would have to pay the ransom, of course. But as soon as the boy was released safely, I would go to the police and tell them where to find the kidnapper. They would arrest Brettschneider and recover the money.

I paused. What would that do for me?

There was no official reward for its return and I couldn't count on Sorrenson's generosity to offer one voluntarily after the fact of recovery, so to speak.

No, I would have to see Sorrenson first and get an ironclad agreement—in writing—to ensure that I would get a hundred thousand dollars of the ransom, no matter how or by whom it was recovered—just as long as it was.

I phoned the Sorrenson Construction Company for an appointment, but Sorrenson's secretary informed me that he was out of town for the weekend and she didn't know where.

I cradled the phone and decided I might just as well see where that redheaded monster lived.

I packed the money into a suitcase and took it with me down to the car. After all, I didn't want some burglar stumbling into a bonanza while I was gone.

Brettschneider's address, 167 North Bark Street, proved to be a Victorian structure in an old residential neighborhood gone to seed. It had apparently been cut up into apartments.

I made a turn at the end of the block, with the intention of coming back for a closer look, but then I quickly pulled to the curb and parked.

Ahead of me a somewhat battered sedan drew up in front of the address. A large, flaming-haired man got out of the driver's side of the car.

It was unmistakably Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider.

The passenger side of the car opened too, and a small redhaired boy of about ten hopped out. He wore a baseball glove and the two of them tossed a ball back and forth a few times before they disappeared into the house. I noticed that the boy limped rather badly on his right foot.

So Brettschneider had a son too? Obviously the two of them were close; a typical warm relationship between father and son.

A new and startling idea formed in my mind.

There had already been two kidnappings, why couldn't there be *three*?

After Ripley paid the ransom and his boy was released, why

couldn't I strike out for myself and kidnap the Brettschneider kid? All I needed was a dozen comic books, a portable TV, a place to confine the redheaded kid, and I was in business.

Certainly Brettschneider would pay the five hundred thousand if he loved his boy at all, and every cent of it would be mine. Best of all, Brettschneider could hardly go to the police to complain.

I drove home in high spirits.

I made myself a large drink and recounted the money.

Naturally I wouldn't harm a hair of the kid's head, but I'd have to tell Brettschneider that if the ransom weren't paid, I would disassemble the boy, item by item. The mere suggestion should jolt his imagination enough so that he would be more than eager to pay.

I took a deep drink.

Of course Brettschneider would be worried sick about the kid. So would the boy's mother, and he probably had one.

What about the boy himself? I would assure him that I meant him no harm, but would he believe me? Would he, instead, be utterly terrified?

How does one deal with a terrified boy? Was I justified in traumatizing his little psyche for the sake of a rotten five hundred grand?

I brooded through three more drinks before I was forced to accept the fact that I just couldn't go through with it. Kidnapping wasn't my kind of action. I would probably bungle it somehow anyway.

I sighed heavily. I would have to go back to Sorrenson and see what kind of a deal I could squeeze out of him.

I made my fifth drink, another double.

After the Ripley kid was returned, I would inform the police of Brettschneider's whereabouts. They would descend upon him and cart him off to prison for at least twelve years and eight months—just when his kid needed him the most.

I blew my nose. The kid had a bad limp. Was that why Brettschneider turned to crime? Did the kid need some kind of a corrective operation? An expensive operation? By specialists who wouldn't lift a scalpel without money in sight?

Was Brettschneider covered by Blue Cross? Blue Shield? Any type of medical insurance? Probably not.

There was no question about it. This was a cruel world. No matter which way one turned, one hurt someone or lost money.

That redhaired kid reminded me of Tiny Tim—the one in *A Christmas Carol*, of course. He had a bad limp too.

I wiped away the birth of a tear. How did my glass get empty so soon? I poured another.

Wasn't there some way I could avoid sending Brettschneider to prison and still make a little money?

I woke up the next morning still at the dining room table. I took two aspirin, survived a cold shower, and breakfasted on black coffee before I went to see Ripley.

Naturally the first thing he asked was, "Did you pick up the money?"

I nodded tiredly. "Yes."

"Did the kidnapper get in touch with you again?"

"Not yet. But he will. And I'm sure your boy is still all right."

Ripley stared out of the barred window. "I had big plans for that money, but that's all gone now." He shrugged. "Well, at least Mabel will be out there to take care of the boy. She's getting married again. I guess she still goes for redheads."

"Redheads?"

He indicated his own hair.

"Used to be red before it turned."

A sudden mouth-opening thought struck me. "Do you know anybody about six feet tall, two hundred pounds? Cleft chin with a scar on it? And red hair?"

He nodded. "Sounds like you're talking about G. B. Brettschneider. He's the man she's marrying. I met him in the pen, and we both got paroled at the same time. I introduced him to Mabel, and I guess things took."

I was shaken. "One more thing. This son of yours, what does he look like?"

"He's twelve, but a little short for his age. Could pass for ten. Red hair. The last time I saw him he was limping. Twisted his ankle sliding into second base. Brettschneider's like a second father to the boy. They get along fine."

I closed my eyes.

The whole damn second kidnapping had been a fake. Ripley's kid never was in danger or would be. It was just a scheme on the part of Brettschneider, and probably Mabel, to pry the ransom money loose from Ripley.

I had been emotionally swindled.

Something else occurred to me, too. At this given moment, Ripley

did not have the money, Sorrenson did not have the money, and Brettschneider did not have the money—but I did; in a suitcase in my care.

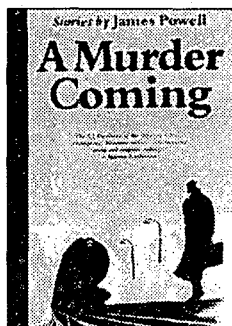
I smiled.

On the way home to pack some of my clothes, I stopped in at a travel agency and picked up several brochures on the Caribbean.

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Survival

by Stephen Wasylyk

When Riker walked in, Orlis turned from talking on the phone long enough to say, "Doc's gone as far as he can with the autopsy on the guy found in the woods, sheriff. He wants you to call."

Riker nodded at the deputy and dialed the number, seeing the emaciated, beginning-to-decompose body partially covered with the red and gold leaves of autumn, arms outstretched as if the man had died reaching for life only to find it just beyond his fingertips.

"One leg fractured," said Medford, "the other shows a severe contusion. Died three or four days ago from shock, exposure, dehydration, starvation, whatever. Hell, I'm just a small town G.P., but I can tell that much. You could say the wilderness killed him, I suppose. He wouldn't be the first. Very difficult to survive thirty miles from nowhere when you can't walk."

"What do you suppose happened to him?"

He could sense the shrug over the phone. "You tell me. Something whacked him across the shins. Could have tripped, tum-

bled, whipped those legs against a rock or tree trunk. Who knows? On my way home, I'll drop off a sheet with his approximate age, description, physical characteristics, and any identifying marks. Until we know who he is and how he got there, it's all speculation. Could be an accident, could be murder."

One thing it's not, thought Riker. Suicide.

The man using the stiff piece of wire on the locked door of the gleaming new red and white Bronco was as thick through the middle as one of the huge overhanging pines along the narrow, rutted logging road, his longhaired, round, no-neck head sitting like a bowling ball on his shoulders.

If it hadn't been for the faded denim jacket and jeans and the rust-spotted yellow pickup behind the Bronco, Landy would have thought an eastern version of Bigfoot had emerged from his cave in celebration of spring.

He shifted his fishing rod to his left hand and unzipped his jacket so that the .38 in the belt holster was clear.

"Something I can help you with?" he asked pleasantly.

The man calmly removed the wire and smiled the sleazy okay-you-caught-me-so-what smile of a kid with a spray can in his hand and the decorated wall of a public building behind him. His face was as round as his bowling ball head; eyes like two finger holes, nose mashed flat, cheeks full; a slab-muscled Neanderthal.

"Nice wheels, Dad. Four-wheel drive, right?"

He took one smirking step toward Landy before he noticed the holster.

"Move off," said Landy, still pleasant.

The .38 wasn't there because this deep into the forest he might disturb a rattler or run into an animal which would like a change of diet but because mug-gings and robberies weren't confined to city streets and, as a rule, the sight of it was enough to convince a human predator it was better to pass the time of day and hope for better luck next time.

The grin on this one's face remained unintimidated, which Landy translated into *duck* a split second too late.

The blow brushed his skull and landed low on the nape of his neck—not enough to knock him out but enough, after a brief flash of pain, to stretch him out

in the dust with absolutely no feeling below his neck, as if he'd received a spinal anesthetic. Even his eyes were closed, the only thing functioning a part of his brain.

He sensed the .38 and holster go; knew his watch, his wallet, and the keys to the Bronco went with it; heard voices tinny and mushy as though coming over a cheap phone.

"Good thing you heard him comin', Les. Gun at his belt and a look on his face saying he wouldn't mind shooting a person or two. What you suppose an old guy like him is doing with his nice Bronco?"

"Probably slogged his way through a nothing job for thirty years or so, got a fat pension, and is living it up a little."

A voice inside Landy screamed, try working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, you bastards! Try fighting the economy, the banks, your competition, the government, and all the other sharks trying to make a buck off of you!

"Bronco's ours now, along with this .38 and the two hundred in his wallet. We'll be living good for a while, but what do we do with *him*? Leave him? Looks like a tough old coot, gun on his belt and all. Could walk out, maybe make trouble for us later."

"Not way down in Olivet, Ham.

That's why I wanted to work up this way."

"Maybe we ought to make sure—got that .38."

"No killing, hear? They find him dead, they're going to look real hard for whoever made him that way."

Good for you, Les, thought Landy.

"Okay." The chuckle was high-pitched, almost a cackle. "Suppose I just make it a little discouragin' to walk? Give us plenty of time to get back home, and if he don't make it, they're goin' to think it was just an accident. Happen to anyone. Go on. Take your pickup. I'll follow in the Bronco."

Landy heard the pickup start, a smooth, well-oiled purr. It looked like hell, but whoever took care of that engine was a real mechanic.

He felt a tingling in his fingers. At least he still had fingers. He sensed something thud against his right leg. A dull pain flooded up from somewhere. Another thud. Another dull pain blended with the first. His eyes opened.

Ham was grinning down at him, holding a four foot length of dead tree limb with both hands. He placed a large foot against Landy's ribs and pushed him off the road.

Like a human pinball, Landy caromed off the trees, shrubs,

and rocks as he rolled toward the creek that gurgled over the rocks five feet below.

As he tumbled, something clicked in his ears, and sharp, shooting pain lanced from the back of his neck. All feeling came back.

He screamed.

Agonizing pain—greater than any he'd ever known—slammed up from his legs, telling him what Ham had done with that dead limb, and as it crested he dimly heard the rumbling engine of the Bronco as Ham backed down the road; a country and western station suddenly blasting into the forest stillness. He passed out, cursing furiously at the thought that he'd paid all that damned money so some atavistic fireplug with a bowling ball head could listen to Willie Nelson in quadraphonic, hi-fi stereo.

Consciousness returned slowly, bringing with it pain so white hot it made his eyes bulge. He clamped his jaw shut in a silent, cursing rage laced with a hate for Ham as immense as the blue sky above the trees, but he was a practical man who had always preached that you handle what you can and let the rest take care of itself, so he reached deep inside, controlled the hate, and allowed the rage to cool. Right now they were luxuries that did nothing but dam the

flow of ideas that could get him out of this situation.

If he lived, he could fill a hot tub with that hate, bathe in it, luxuriate in it. And do something about it.

He wasn't dead yet, the pain wouldn't kill him, and if he had any chance to survive, he'd better forget everything *except* surviving. Any other mental effort was a waste.

He lay still. His body had lost all warmth, like a corpse; his skin cold and clammy. Shock, he told himself. And no good Samaritan appearing out of the trees with words of comfort and a heavy blanket to drape over him.

He was on his own.

A fisherman, not a woodsman. He knew how to select a campsite, build a safe fire, had learned to stay out of poison ivy and nettles and not to step into unseen holes in his waders, never bothered to identify more than a few of the trees and bushes. He envied people who could, but that had nothing to do with knowing where the best spots might be, exactly how to cast a fly or use a spinner and which to use when; with testing the water temperature, keeping an eye on the sun so that he didn't cast a shadow in the water. He'd fished creeks, rivers, lakes for every variety of trout, coho, pike, bass, walleye, muskie. As far as anything that

lived out of the water—fanged, toothed, or clawed—was concerned, he let it alone if it let him alone.

None of which had prepared him for lying out in the middle of nowhere with what felt like two fractured legs.

A friend had once told him, you ought to learn to survive out there, Landy, in case something happens.

Something finally had. Something named Ham.

Damn. Call 911, somebody.

No one would take note of his absence. No search party would look for him. He'd come here on his own, telling no one where he was going.

As far as his son was concerned, his father was traveling somewhere. He'd be in touch when he got around to it. The old man knew how to take care of himself. He'd grown up watching him do it.

No one else was expecting him, and no one would become concerned when he didn't arrive.

He'd turned into the unposted logging road on impulse. He wanted to see where it led, give the four-wheel drive a workout and check the stream for fishing. Ruttled, humped, underbrush and trees pressing close, it seemed no one could have preceded him on it for a year.

Why Ham and Les had de-

cided to follow it, he had no idea. Unless they'd been following him.

His mind slipped into a fifth gear of emotional flatness, mentally slicing his situation into elements he could handle. He set aside the clamminess, the trembling hands, the pain. Possibilities flickered past. Priorities settled.

What the hell. He wasn't through until he was through.

Head slightly below his feet, he'd been caught by the stiff, low-growing budding branches of some sort of mountain shrub just above the narrow, gently sloping, rock-studded edge of the creek bed; exposed because rain had been rare this spring, a boulder here and there, interlaced debris brought downstream at one time left behind when it receded.

Couldn't stay here.

Break loose of the brush, slide the rest of the way.

It would hurt to move, though. Damn, it would *hurt*.

He clamped his jaw shut, closed his eyes, braced his hands, half lifted his upper body and pushed.

And slid, screaming when his left foot hung up on the bush momentarily and his leg twisted.

And passed out.

He came to covered with sweat, shoulders and waist on the rocky bed, legs still pointed slightly

upward—and no longer certain that the pain wouldn't kill him.

It took every ounce of will power he had to brace his hands again and push. His left leg smacked into a protruding rock. He screamed and passed out again.

Three moves and three red curtains of pain later, his back was propped against a boulder, body soaked with sweat, chest heaving, hands trembling.

Time to take stock of what was left of Landy, the adventuresome fisherman; a nomad looking for something he couldn't define. It sure as hell hadn't been something like this.

Above his knees—bruises, abrasions, a giant vise clamped on his neck so that the slightest movement brought a stab of pain, whiplash style.

Below—the left leg sending an unmistakable message when moved slightly; the right not as bad. Gentle exploring fingers told him why.

Concealed under his slacks, leather boots laced to mid-calf. Ham had clubbed his left shin just above the boot, but he'd hit the boot on his right leg. The left was definitely fractured, but the protected right perhaps not. Perhaps only severely bruised.

One thing more had helped absorb the blow.

Strapped to his right boot was his sheathed knife, which Ham

hadn't known was there or it would have been gone with everything else. Instead the knife was now in his hand, polished five-inch blade reflecting the sky.

All good, but not good enough.

He tested his right leg by bracing it against a rock and pushing. The pain was almost bearable. Couldn't support him. Not now.

Check it again later.

Ten miles or so to the highway, but he was guessing. He hadn't paid much attention because it hadn't mattered.

How to get there.

Crawl, if he couldn't use that right leg? If he made it, he'd be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Longest distance for crawling with broken leg—Landy, U.S.A.

Fame could wait. First things first.

Inventory time.

A city mugger, more knowledgeable and accustomed to denizens educated to distribute their valuables about their persons, would have never overlooked his inside jacket pockets. Ham and Les had—in too much of a hurry, or brains addled by the Bronco and the cash in the wallet.

In the left: reading glasses. (Couldn't read a map without them.) Full bottle of ibuprofen tablets. (Never know when you'll

develop a headache. He sure had one now.) Waterproof container with matches. (One of the few survival lessons he'd learned—the hard way, naturally.)

Other inside pocket: wallet with credit cards. (They could have used those. And maybe not. Clerks tend to become suspicious of gold card receipts signed with an X.) Pack of cigarettes. (Carried only to prove he could do without them.) Lighter for the cigarettes. (In case his willpower wilted.) Still packaged coil of fifteen pound test braided line. (Bought a hundred miles back in a sporting goods store only because the man running it had been so pleasant he hadn't wanted to walk out without buying something and the box had been on display, price marked down.)

He gulped down three of the tablets.

Fine for headaches. If they did well now, he'd make a TV commercial. Broken leg? Don't let pain slow you down.

Slanting shadows said it was three hours or so until sunset.

He could move only by leaning backward and pushing with his hands, legs dragging after him. The stabs of pain when his head shifted he could live with. They had none of the intensity of the huge throb his legs had become, the slightest jar enough to bring a moan and a film of

sweat and a complete stop before he could build up enough nerve to move again, but somehow before twilight set in, he laboriously accumulated enough dry wood, dead leaves, twigs, and pine needles for a fire that might last until morning if carefully tended, and several fairly straight, sturdy lengths of inch-thick branches tediously hacked from a dead limb carried there by the stream sometime in the past.

During those hours, he'd realized that some of the throbbing in his left leg was due to swelling confined by his tightly laced boot. It took twenty minutes to remove the lace because he wasn't as limber as he might have been, and because the slightest touch made him gasp, but the throbbing eased so much he did the same to the other.

When he finished, he considered it probably the smartest thing he'd done all day, next to placing his fire close to the flat face of a boulder so that the heat was reflected back at him. (He'd read that somewhere.)

As the purple shadows closed in, a color he thought very appropriate to the situation, he sat in the little pool of light, looking at his useless legs and wondering what the hell he was doing there, hearing the rustle and whisper as animals (small, he hoped) came down to drink, and

thinking that in a movie, Clint Eastwood or somebody would come equipped with the ability to fashion a bow and arrow or spear or trap that would give him one of those animals to skin and roast at his fire, but his knowledge was centered on fishing, which told him he would find none here; the stream too rocky, the water too shallow and too swift.

The least Ham could have done was push him off the road above a pool. He just might mention that. Among other things. Before he killed him.

He didn't care about the Bronco. Detroit churned them out and he could always get another. His camping gear and tackle were something else, particularly the tackle—some inherited from his father, the rest acquired through the years and all destined for his own son. Replaceable, but it wouldn't be the same.

He and Ham would have quite a talk. Yes, indeed. With a great deal of emphasis placed on the wisdom of deliberately breaking someone's leg.

Particularly his.

He laid out the package of fishing line, the branches he'd collected, and the leather laces from his boots after he'd soaked them in the stream.

He'd known from the beginning he'd have to try splinting

his left leg. The break, he felt, was clean; swollen and discolored, his leg appeared to be straight, but left unprotected it could easily suffer additional damage that could leave him crippled. Or cost him the leg. If he survived.

He'd delayed only because he wanted to get every move precisely settled in his methodical mind. He was capable of trying only once. If it was done badly, he wouldn't have the strength to undo it and try again.

If he was capable of doing it at all.

He selected six of the straightest limbs, trimmed them to the same length, and shaved one side flat with his knife. Joined three together by lacing short crosspieces into place with the fishing line, the flat sides facing away from the crosspieces. Now he had two splints long enough to extend from below his knee to his boot.

He removed his jacket, stripped off his heavy woollen shirt, and redonned the jacket. He cut the sleeves and collar from the shirt and cut the body in half, folding the halves to the width of the splints. He tied one end of each sleeve with line and stuffed them with pine needles. Using more line, he bound a sleeve and a shirt-half to the flat sides of each of the splints and

positioned them to either side of his leg.

Not bad, Landy.

It would hurt. It would hurt so damned much, he wasn't certain he wanted to do it at all.

Might be better just to sit here and see how long he could last. He had plenty of water, and a man could live without food for a long time if he had water. Who knows? He might be able to pull a Clint Eastwood and come up with a small animal or two.

And another crazy fisherman might come along sooner or later.

He fed another stick into the fire.

Might be the simplest way after all.

Nothing to go back to. The business no longer needed him.

He'd inherited it from his father. Neither had been capable of more than standing up and taking the blows, and both had come close to going down several times but had hung on, one way or another. Not his son. He seemed to sense where the punches were coming from, to be able to dodge and weave and slip when it came to the banks, the competition, the clients, the government. Took him just five years to double the volume.

The business was in better hands than his, which was why he'd been considering moving here instead of driving up two or three times a year for the fish-

ing. Fishing alone, though, didn't seem sufficient reason to pull up roots.

The idea for this trip had been his son's.

No reason why you shouldn't get in some spring fishing, Dad. You've earned it.

Sounded good, but that wasn't why he'd bought the Bronco and taken off, though. They both knew it.

She'd been dead for a year now, and he still expected her to be there when he came down for breakfast. You never get used to it, someone had told him. True. The trip hadn't helped. Hadn't helped at all.

Laughing. Never know, Dad. You might meet someone. You'd get no complaint from me if you did. You have a long way to go yet, and I'm sure Mom wouldn't want you to go alone.

That long way seemed to have been cut short.

To hell with it.

Bent over, hands in his lap, he rested, a very weary, lean man with gray hair, in the light and warmth of a puny fire that in the vastness of the forest was less than the light of the dimmest star above the arrow tips of the tall pines; the pain so much a part of him the ibuprofen had no effect, just as hers had become part of her in spite of the injections.

Yet she'd smiled at him right

up to the end, and only her eyes and the vise-like grip of her hand told him how much she'd been suffering.

He opened tear-blurred eyes and looked at the splints.

What the hell do you know about pain, Landy?

Her eyes and her grip setting a standard for him he knew he'd never meet, he fashioned a noose in each of the leather thongs, slipped them over the splints and his leg and pulled them tight, jaw clamped so hard his teeth hurt, refusing to give in, refusing to let the scream out into the night as the splints tightened against his leg, tying the laces off when he could pull no more. The leather would shrink as it dried, tightening the splints further, and he'd use his belt and more fishing line to secure them firmly.

He waited until his hands stopped shaking and he was no longer breathing in shuddering gasps before fashioning a pair of crude crutches out of two of the longer limbs he'd salvaged—notching and tying a short crosspiece to the top of each and one farther down for his hands.

The result could have been designer-created for a Crooked Little Man Who Walked a Crooked Mile.

Not until then did he lean on one elbow; looking into the dancing flames of his small fire,

seeing memories and no dreams beyond tomorrow, smoking cigarette after cigarette, which seemed to work better than the second batch of ibuprofen.

Those things will kill you, Dad.

They wouldn't have time.

What he needed right now was a doctor with a syringe. He'd even settle for a drug dealer. Put his illegal substance to legitimate use. But neither made house calls, having both learned that when you're the lone source for a service, the people must come to you.

He ran out of fuel before dawn, that period when the night birds grow silent and the animals no longer rustle through the brush or come to drink from the stream, that period when millions of people pause and wonder whether another day was worth the effort.

Including an old guy named Landy, who should have reinforced the cartoon stereotypes by planting his rear in a rocker and spending his time telling the younger ones how tough things had been in the old days.

Like heat from the fiery end of a piece of metal withdrawn from a forge, by dawn the pain had permeated his entire body. Clamping his jaw tight, he ignored it and stripped off his T-shirt, cut

it in half, padded the tops of his crutches, and tied the cloth in place.

Taking deep breaths and using his hands and the crutches, he pushed himself backwards up the bank to the road, where he lay gasping before grasping a sapling and pulling himself erect, congratulating himself after the blood stopped roaring in his ears.

The pain he'd endured to make the splint and strap it into place had given him a dividend he hadn't anticipated. It had increased his mobility tremendously, absorbing the little bumps that had frozen him with agony.

He tucked the crutches under his arms, took several hesitant steps and fell, dragged himself to a nearby tree and stubbornly pulled himself erect once more.

His methodical, analytical mind at work again, he realized he was flinching from the flare of pain when his weight shifted to his right leg. He'd have to plant the leg firmly while he swung the crutches forward or forget the whole thing.

He solved it by clenching his teeth and grunting, as his foot hit the ground, the names of the men who had put him there, the hate stronger than the pain, mastering a slow rhythm that took him down the road—a scarecrow of a man with a make-



HE SOLVED IT BY CLENCHING HIS TEETH AND GRUNTING, AS HIS FOOT HIT THE GROUND, THE NAMES OF THE MEN WHO HAD PUT HIM THERE, THE HATE STRONGER THAN THE PAIN.

shift splint on his leg, using makeshift crutches, no more than a dot in the greening universe of the forest.

He was in no hurry. He rested frequently, but by mid-afternoon he could go no farther. He slid down the bank to the stream and lay exhausted, his hands cramped into claws from clutching the crutches, his neck screaming in protest, his right leg throbbing now as much as his broken left. He gulped down two more ibuprofen tablets with the cold water and lay on his back in the warm spring sun.

After a time, he removed his loose right boot, stripped off his sock, rolled up his pant leg, and thrust his leg into the stream. Unlike the spot where Ham had pushed him off the road, the stream here had slowed and formed a few deep pools. Natural icepack, courtesy of Mother Nature.

He closed his eyes, the sun warm on his shoulders, too tired even to light a cigarette, felt a tickle and opened his eyes. Never having seen a human toe, a trout was investigating.

He smiled. The scriptwriter must have penciled this in. Cameras rolling, Mr. Eastwood.

His fisherman's skill helped him to spear two innocents before the others became wary. He baked them on a flat rock before a better fire than the one he'd

made the night before, thinking that Cajuns weren't the only ones capable of burning fish, and settled down, four more ibuprofen tablets inside and doing their best, almost at the end of his cigarettes, and beginning to believe he might make it after all.

Maybe.

He was through before noon of the third day. His hands had given out, painfully cramping and slipping off the crutches and letting them jab into his armpits when he least expected it. His T-shirt padding had been pounded flat, and the seams of his jacket sleeves had split. His armpits throbbed. The right leg was worse, and the tight splint had created a pulsating agony that made him light-headed and nauseated. That, or the ibuprofen tablets with which he'd been bombarding his empty stomach.

The stream had become rocky and shallow again so there were no fish, and during the night the long-delayed spring rain finally arrived, drowning his fire and making his teeth chatter.

Daylight brought with it a cool wind and dark clouds brushing the tops of the trees. He clamped his jaw and forced his stiff and aching body back to the road, lying panting and suddenly weak and lightheaded.

He palmed his forehead, finding the skin dry and oven hot.

Just what he needed.

He made perhaps fifty yards before one of the crutches slipped in the mud and he collapsed. He lay there, staring at it dumbly and thinking that it wouldn't have made a damned bit of difference if the road had been dry. He could no longer use the crutches. His armpits could take no more pounding, and both shoulders felt as fractured as his legs.

You couldn't call on young muscles, much less old ones, to do something for which they hadn't been conditioned and not expect them to give up, and he hadn't exactly been in training for the Great Crutch Marathon.

He fumbled out his bottle of ibuprofen tablets, tried to shake two into a clawed, trembling hand and succeeded only in dropping the bottle and tablets into the mud.

Someone must be angry with him for exceeding six in twenty-four hours.

One cigarette left in his crumpled pack. His quivering fingers not only snapped it in two but dropped it into the mud alongside the tablets.

The laughter started with a dry chuckle before becoming a roar. He sat in the mud slapping his thighs as if he'd been told the funniest joke in the world.

The laughter ebbed into shuddering sobs.

He passed a hand over his face. Hadn't shaved that morning. Getting forgetful.

Damned trees were undulating like belly dancers.

What the hell. No tambourines. Where were the tambourines?

Only a droning in his ear that came and went.

Gnat. He pumped one ear with the heel of his hand, then the other.

Gnat still there.

He shook his head and cocked it, listening.

Maybe not in his ear. Somewhere else.

He turned his head. The road rose slightly.

A swarm. Over the hill.

He rolled to his hands and knees. Slowly he began to crawl. Not easy on two hands and one knee. Hands down, pull up knee, raise up and thrust hands forward, pull up knee; splinted leg dragging, hands slipping occasionally and face plunging into the mud.

His temperature rose, leaving him alternately burning and shaking with chill. Slowly his fevered brain closed down, defending itself against this madness, locking out all sensation and thought except for three words that accompanied his crawling, like the hypnotic, ir-

regular beats of a drummer without a sense of rhythm . . .

Ham . . . Les . . . Olivet . . .

. . . wobbling down the road like a crippled forest creature looking for a refuge in which to lick its wounds in peace. And die.

Elbows on his desk, Riker stroked his forehead as though coaxing his brain to work. No I.D. on the man. His pockets held a knife, a bottle of ibuprofen tablets, a coil of fishing line, and matches in a waterproof box. Didn't appear to have used any of them. Robbed? Didn't seem to fit. Nothing about his clothes indicated he'd have anything worth mugging him for. Even the heavy, cleated shoes were cheap, the only thing unique the caked grease caught up in the cleats. Probably picked up in a garage. If he'd worked outside, it would have been mud.

Familiar sound to Medford's words—"one leg fractured, the other with a severe contusion." Where had he heard them before?

A scruffy, mud-streaked red Bronco, the upper half splotchy as though it had been worked over with touchup spray paint from an auto supply store, pulled into the gravel parking lot of the real estate office across the road, a small building with log walls aged to ebony and silver.

Third visit. This could be getting serious.

He'd kidded her about it at dinner the night before.

"Is he in the market for a house or the real estate agent?"

She'd been very pretty when young, and the years hadn't really taken much away from her. She hadn't bothered to rinse the hair blue, red, brown, or any other color, letting the gray show through the deep brunette waves, but it was well done and suited the oval, high-cheekboned face and the brown eyes. As good as she looked in her working clothes of checked shirt, skirt, and boots, she could stop the carousel cold when dressed up.

One eyebrow arched. "If he offers enough, he can have both."

"Okay with me, but first I run him across the road, fingerprint him, and check him out to be sure he's not wanted by the law or running away from a wife who doesn't understand him."

She sighed. "Don't get too concerned. He hasn't made a pass at me yet." She'd used those words jokingly in the past. Now they held a soft regret that told him she'd found something different this time. "You can warm up your official law officer's fingerprint kit if he ever gets around to it. Identified the man you found yet?"

He shook his head. "Takes time."

"Not a nice way to die, crippled out there."

He shrugged. "He's not the first to get into trouble and won't be the last. Had one east of here last spring, you'll remember. Someday they may learn that running around alone out there without a radio can be as dangerous as scuba diving without a partner. When you reach out for help, there had better be someone handy."

A sudden opaqueness in her eyes made him wish he hadn't said that. In that way. There were other situations when you wanted a hand to grasp yours when you reached out.

He kissed her cheek and grinned. "Ask nicely and I'll book him on something. Give you more time to work on him. Quickest way to a man's heart is to bring him a file baked in a cake when he's locked in a cell."

The opaqueness was gone, her eyebrow arched again. "I don't need your help to get a date for the prom."

Always good for a laugh, his mother, but no matter how quiet, the sound of weeping had a way of penetrating the still hours before dawn, and cold water couldn't erase red eyes before breakfast. A vacuum in a person's life had to be filled with something. The problem was finding it.

Could have been yesterday, not two years ago.

"Medford says I have only nine months or so," his father had told him quietly. "Take care of your mother. The real estate office will keep her busy, of course, but she'll miss me. Not that I was such a prize to have around, but twenty-five years is a long time to live with someone."

He turned his face away, his brain capable of producing only the word *damn* in an endless chant.

"I regret I won't be here to see if you'll be as lucky as I was. Look, no reason she shouldn't marry again. If she meets someone, you stay on the sidelines, cheering her on. That's what I'll be doing."

Across the road, a gray-haired man limped from the Bronco into the office. Head up, shoulders back, goodlooking guy, even with the beard. Something about him even at this distance. His father had walked like that, like only one thing in the whole wide world could beat him—the thing that beats everyone in the end.

Her style of man, all right.

Sort of a starchy cleanliness about him that didn't go with that Bronco. Tell a lot about a person from what he drives. This one should have been in something clean, shining, and expensive, although a fully

equipped Bronco qualified on the last item.

Bronco. Triggered a memory of a stolen vehicle report. Fracture. Contusion. No wonder they sounded familiar.

He punched out the sheriff's number for a county sixty miles east.

Dorfman's voice rumbled. "No, we never did locate the vehicle. It wasn't where the man said he'd run off the road, tumbled it, and crawled out with a broken leg. Said he had a CB on board but it wouldn't work after the accident. If it wasn't there, he said, someone must have towed it away. Sure they did. I think someone smashed his leg and stole the Bronco, and knowing how hard it would be to prove without witnesses, he intended to take care of it himself. When I told him so, he just smiled."

"And you've no idea—he didn't let anything slip?"

"A trucker found him on the road and called in on his CB. He was out of his head on the way to the hospital, muttering something that sounded like 'hamless omelet.' Made no sense to me. Why the sudden interest?"

Riker wrote "hamless omelet" on his pad.

"There's a red Bronco across the road that looks as though someone doctored the top half with red spray paint."

"What does the driver look like?"

"Tall. Lean. Walk that says don't mess with me." He drew a circle around the words on his pad. "We found a body in the woods yesterday. One leg broken. No idea of who he is or how he got there. Any ideas?"

In the background he could hear a stern male voice lecturing someone about the speed limit in town's being thirty-five, not fifty-five.

"Sure," said Dorfman. "The same as yours. If it's him, he went out and got that damned Bronco back on his own, but I don't want to know how and neither do you. I still don't know how he survived, and if we'd put our hands on whoever put him out there, I wouldn't guarantee we wouldn't have broken a few bones on our own. Whoever smashed his leg and left him had to be the kind who would gut-shoot a deer just for laughs. If I were you, I'd just let it drop."

"I'm not sure I can do that."

"That's up to you," said Dorfman slowly. "But I've been a law officer longer than you've been alive and I'll just say that if it is what it appears to be, you're back to no witnesses again, and even if the county prosecutor thinks you made a case, the juries there are no different from the juries here. You'd be wasting the taxpayers' money."

Riker cradled the phone as the gray-haired man came out of the office and climbed into the Bronco.

Orlis called across the room. "While you were on the phone, Clayton down in Olivet called. Heard about our body. Wondered if it could be one of a pair of sleazeball brothers missing down there, Ham and Les Speaks. Ran an auto repair service. Told him the guy was on the heavy side. He said if he was lucky, it'd be Ham."

Ham and Les Speaks from Olivet.

Ham.

Les.

Olivet.

Fevered brain and mumbling. *Hamless omelet*. No wonder it made no sense to Dorfman.

Damn. Clayton *was* lucky. No doubt about that. Didn't need Sherlock Holmes to explain that broken leg. Could have been spelled out in neon. The Eye for an Eye Brigade firmly believed in retribution. He ought to know. He'd been raised by a charter member.

And Les? Running, if he had nothing to do with the leg breaking. The Eye for an Eye Brigade exacted only what was due.

Approve or disapprove, condone or condemn didn't apply. He wore a badge.

But Dorfman was right. Proof was a law officer's burden. He'd

have a helluva time making a case. And no matter what the charge was, it could be plea-bargained down to involuntary manslaughter. A good defense attorney would simply point out that Ham hadn't been killed outright even though some people would say he'd earned it. He'd been given the same chance he'd given the man. He simply hadn't made it.

Sentence, if it came to that: probation.

He watched the Bronco disappear down the road, sighed, and called her.

"I saw him leave," he said. "Lose the sale?"

"Good Lord. I've raised a perverted monster who spies on his mother so that he can get on one of those television talk shows. No, I didn't lose the sale. He bought the Roland cabin."

"I guess he liked what he saw."

She knew he wasn't referring to the cabin. "I guess he did."

There was a softness to the words, a tone of happy surprise, as though she'd found something she'd never expected to see again.

"Congratulations. On both sales." He grinned and hung up.

"If it really is Ham," said Orlis, "what do you think happened?"

What had happened, thought Riker, was older than the legal

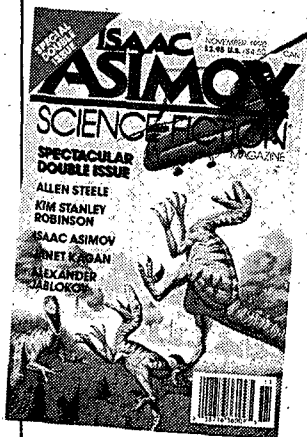
system, had been played out in innumerable ways in every remote corner of the world since men stood upright, and only the unique and special ones sur-

vived.

She did have a way of picking them.

"I suppose we'll never really know," he said.

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C Is for Cookie

by Rob Kantner

“**N**o” isn’t a word I like to say to pretty women. But I’d said it to Charlotte Ambrose, in no uncertain terms, when she disappeared from the restaurant, leaving me stuck with her screaming two-year-old charge.

I hadn’t wanted to meet her in the first place. Charlotte and I were an old deal, long dead and a bitter memory. But in that excited, rich-broad, enthusiastic way of hers, she’d persuaded me on the phone to meet her at Mr. Mike’s in Westland to talk over an “assignment.” There was money in it for me, she said. That tipped the scales in favor of going, if only barely.

It had been twelve years so she looked older, but she was still the white-blondé, creamy Nordic, limber, and sensual Charlotte that I remembered. And the money she offered was my usual rate—two fifty per day plus expenses. But the job was crap, a locate job on a boyfriend of hers who’d disappeared. I turned her down without a second thought, partly because I didn’t like the sound of the job and partly for the satisfaction of saying no to her just once and,

in that small, petty way, getting back at her for what she’d done to me years before. And then, without the slightest warning, she excused herself to go to the restroom and just plain dropped out of sight.

I didn’t realize it at first, of course. I finished my beer and smoked a cigar and stared absently around the restaurant at the handful of people there. Then the kid, a chubby little blue-eyed boy named Will, commenced to screaming. I fidgeted, offering him crackers to eat and utensils to play with, but he sent up a howl to the ceiling, his plump face red like a balloon. Charlotte’s pit stop stretched abnormally long, and I finally sent a waitress to check up on her. Gone, she said. Not in the parking lot, either. Leaving me alone with the brat.

“**I** know she’s a bitch,” Kate said, “but why would she abandon her kid? With you?”

We were in my apartment in Belleville and the kid was clinging to my leg, staring at Kate. He’d stopped hollering about halfway back from Mr. Mike’s

and was doing the shy wide-eyed bit, occasionally issuing a hiccup. Kate was staying with me for a few days because her ex-husband, whose name is, apparently, That Jerk, was conducting his semi-annual harassment campaign against her and she needed a place to hide out. I said, "The kid's not hers. She told me she was babysitting him for a friend who was away for a few days."

Kate was a short, shaggy off-blonde, painfully thin and gaunt, and she wore her usual expression of half skepticism and half harried patience. "You know, in the six years we've been involved, I've seen you get people shot in my house, and I've seen you rough up deputy sheriffs, and I've seen you take some of the sleaziest characters in the world out for dinner. But I never imagined you'd bring home an abandoned toddler."

"That's why you should stick around, kid. Officially I may be just an apartment maintenance guy, but there's always more to Perkins than that." I disengaged Will from my leg and headed into the kitchen to build a drink and figure out what to do. Kate went over to the kid. "Are you hungry, Will?"

"Ha," he said seriously, his face still flushed.

To Kate's arched eyebrow I

interpreted, having picked up a little of the kid's jargon, "Yes."

"See cookie," Will added.

"I'll check," she answered. As she pawed through the cupboards, I poured myself some straight Jack Daniel's. Groping among the boxes, wrappers, and debris, she said, "I take it you turned her down."

"I did."

She found a bag of stale Oreos and handed one to the boy, who practically inhaled it, looking hopefully and much more happily at Kate. "What was the job?"

"Some boyfriend of hers disappeared. She wanted him found. I wasn't up for it."

"Sure, Ben. But now you're stuck with the kid. What do you plan to do about that?"

Will had found the bathroom and I heard the toilet flush. Thank God—a good, disciplined, toilet-trained little kid. He came out of the bathroom sans jeans and trailing a long stream of toilet paper. As Kate and I both dived to gather it up, I said, "She's just peevisish. Sooner or later she'll call me and tell me who the kid's mother is. Or, even better, I'll call her." I left Kate to pull the kid's pants back on, shoved the bundle of toilet paper into the wastebasket, and went to the phone where I found taped to it a slip with a telephone number.

"The Kroger's store in Belleville called," Kate said from behind me. "Apparently the check you passed there bounced."

"I didn't *pass* a check, I *gave* them one. And if it bounced, it's probably some screwup." At least I hoped so, since my checking account seemed to have a mind of its own. I reached for the phone and it rang as my hand touched the receiver.

"Enjoying the babysitting?" Charlotte asked sweetly.

I sighed. "Nice gag, Charlotte."

Kate leaned her bluejeaned fanny against the edge of the counter, listening. The boy was studiously opening and closing cupboard doors but apparently was well brought up enough not to mess with anything inside. In my ear, Charlotte laughed and said, "I *do* rather fancy the idea of your taking care of a little baby boy, but I must confess that humor wasn't my only motive."

Charlotte never did anything that didn't redound to her advantage. "So fill me in," I said evenly.

"You do the job, Ben," she said. "Find Chuck Crane for me. And then I'll tell you where the kid belongs. Don't worry, nobody's looking for him right now. You've got enough time, if you're at all as talented at your

work as I'm told you are. And I'll pay you as agreed."

The boy, having decided I was okay, I guess, was giving me a sunny, radiant look, which was about all I needed just then.

I said, "This is one sick, twisted game you're playing, Charlotte."

"But effective. And don't think about trying to track me down. I'm where you could never, ever find me. You'll never find the boy's mother, either. When you have the answer, call my home number and leave word on my message box. Within four hours I'll call you back and we'll meet someplace. Do it fast, Ben." She hung up.

I slammed the phone down and banged my fist against the wall, which got me nothing but sore knuckles. Kate looked more gaunt than usual. I told her the story and she said immediately, "So turn the kid over to the cops. Simple enough."

I sat down on a chair and lighted a small cork-tipped cigar. After a long pause I said, "Nope. Not right now, anyway."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"Because," I said without looking at her, "I take care of things myself. I don't dump them off on someone else. You know that."

"So you're going to let that ruthless swine strong-arm you," she jibed.

The boy stood between us, eyes wide, not understanding the words but picking up on the tone, for sure. "I can't win every point, Kate."

"Yeah," she said grimly, pushing herself away from the counter and going to the sink. She made herself speciously busy with some dishes. "You just want to do it. This is just a convenient excuse to get involved with her again. You just don't learn, do you?"

It was a dumb argument and one I'd run out of patience with. Getting to my feet, I said, "You got a choice. Come with me while I try to get a line on this Crane fella, or sit here and sulk."

"I'll stay here, thanks," she said. "The boy's had enough moving around for one day. You go and help your girlfriend."

Kate could sure turn on a person, I reflected as I headed out I-94 in my '71 Mustang. It had been getting worse lately, worse than ever. After six years, it was finally going sour. I knew it and she knew it; what we hadn't got around to yet was what Bob Seger calls "the famous final scene."

She came close to starting one with that girlfriend crack, though—as if I wanted to do the job, as if Charlotte meant anything to me any more. Fact was,

I was feeling nothing but cold burning fury at what she'd done, exploiting a helpless two-year-old and the boy's unknowing family. But it was like her.

We'd met in the mid-sixties under the most clichéd of circumstances: her mother and my mom fixed us up. The two women couldn't have been more different. Charlotte's mother was your typical Franklin Village matron, and my mom was a nursing home supervisor who boarded kids for rich folks to make a few extra bucks. (Sidelines, you see, are an old Perkins family tradition, though my mom's moonlighting was far more respectable than mine.)

One of my mom's boarders—and a real brat as I recall—was Charlotte's younger brother. My mom thought it would be good for me to find a "nice girl" from a "good family" and settle down. And forget the questionable job I had as aide to a union boss with a smudged reputation. What Charlotte's mother thought isn't on the record, although I suspect she welcomed the suit of a no-frills straight arrow like me after seeing a steady parade of giggle-headed rich kids march through Charlotte's life. Shy Charlotte wasn't.

It started for laughs and got heavy quick, quicker than either of us expected. Unlike most of the women I'd known until then,

Charlotte was dynamic. Her considerable physical attributes aside, she was bright, enthusiastic, challenging, tough-minded, and exciting. Her bright light burned white hot, attracting people to her; and sometimes I'd sit and wonder what she saw in me, a straight, sober, hard-edged Detroit boy on the make.

We got ourselves a house in the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood. It was one of the older ones, a rambling yellow brick place on the Detroit River with its own boathouse. My job was increasingly intense and dangerous, and Charlotte was meteoric and unpredictable and not the easiest person in the world to live with, and yet, all these years later, I remember those days as being tranquil. I remember barbecue dinners out on the big airy porch; long walks along the river; card games and beer of an evening with one or two of the young couples who lived around us; evenings spent in debate; sunrise strolls around the Belle Isle fountain; afternoons making love in the enormous second story riverfront bedroom while the curtains floated in the air and freighters glided by outside in ghastly silence.

The riot in 1967 changed things for keeps. My mom's nursing home got torched and

she died on the second day, trying to get an inmate out. The Feds came after my boss and some others on tax and racketeering charges and they zeroed in on me, trying to make me Public Snitch Number One. I refused to talk, even though they gave me immunity; my name got in the papers; and one day, when it looked as if I was going to jail on contempt charges, I came home to find Charlotte gone. Not a word. Just empty closets and her car gone from the garage.

Things bottomed out then, thank God. The Feds made their case via the net worth method, the defendants went off to Lewisburg, and I went off the hook. A lot of years passed and I never heard of Charlotte again—and thought of her as little as possible, which is to say once a day.

But I didn't rehash ancient history on my way to Southfield. Instead, I tried to piece together what I'd half-heard from Charlotte as she told me about her mysterious Chuck Crane. A thin, wiry, athletic man, she said, in his mid-thirties. She'd met him on St. Patrick's Day at one of the Irish bars on the west side. He lived in the Franklin Park Towers and drove a Corvette. He had lots of clothes, manners, style, money, and smarts, and he never seemed to work. He called himself an "investor." He and Char-

lotte made several long trips together, one to Switzerland, one to the Bahamas, and she introduced him to her daddy, whom I once sarcastically referred to as the "oil seal king." By Charlotte's standards the affair was serious.

Until he disappeared a month ago.

The Franklin Park Towers sprawls at the intersection where the Lodge Freeway dumps out onto I-696 heading west and Telegraph Road shoots north toward Pontiac. There's a lot of government land there, including a couple of military reserve outfits and an old Nike missile base; there are also shopping centers, synagogues, and endless miles of well-heeled subdivisions with names like Bingham Farms, Mayfair, and Beverly Hills. I've often thought of it as the place where Detroit busted open and gushed people north.

The apartments are huge and glum looking, the style known as Twentieth Century Insane Asylum. Pretty they aren't, but they happen to be one of the prestige addresses of the Detroit area. I found Crane's apartment and, with the timely help of a skeleton key I'd acquired at great cost some years before (its previous owner is now a guest of the state at Marquette), gained entry.

It was a single bedroom place,

conspicuously neat and sterile; rented furniture, nothing personal on the walls, none of the little debris of personality in the place at all. I had the bizarre feeling that I'd broken by accident into the complex's model apartment—a place everyone looked at but no one lived in—not a place where a wealthy young man had lived for several years. Judging from the dry sink, the painstaking orderliness of the silverware and plates, the clean dry tub and the absence of dirty linen, it looked to me as if no one had lived there for a month or more, maybe. There was also a feeling of emptiness. Like a personality had been there once but had left for good.

The resident rental agent wasn't much help. He had, after all, a huge number of tenants to keep track of, and he didn't know any of them personally, let alone Chuck Crane. I also don't think he was overly impressed with my cover story that I was an investigator for Mass Mutual Insurance. He glumly went through his records anyway, giving me beady little hostile looks. Yes, Crane had rented the apartment. He'd paid his rent a year in advance (and the thought occurred to me: who in his right mind does *that*?). No, there were never any complaints about him. Where Crane worked was not the agent's busi-

ness. The only concrete thing I could get out of him was Crane's license plate number. A thin, very frail thread, but the best I could do.

I headed south on Telegraph to the huge, cylindrical Holiday Inn, went inside to a bank of phones, and called a friend in Lansing. She's a financial analyst for the state of Michigan, and a damned good one, and she has that invaluable resource for a fellow in my line of work, direct and unlimited access to the state's computer records. She even carries a portable terminal home, which was where I found her. I think helping me is a kick for her, even though she fusses a lot about my occasional requests. I help her out with things from time to time, and buy her lunch in Detroit once a month, so it evens out. Sort of.

She put me on hold and was gone quite a while firing up her terminal and going into the computer on her second telephone line. She came back to tell me that Crane's car was registered to a firm called Pan Peninsular Products—such a Michigan kind of name I was surprised they didn't throw a "Wolverine" in—based in the Penobscot Building in Detroit. I asked, in passing, for a run-down on the company and she said it would take some time

and she'd get back to me on it later that night.

It was pushing late afternoon by then, but I headed straight down to the Penobscot. It was tired looking and half empty, like many downtown office buildings since the Renaissance Center went up a few years back. Pan Peninsular occupied a suite on the tenth floor. I stood in the echoing hallway and did my magic act with a skeleton key again. I found the suite stripped clean—nothing left but the stink of cigarettes, a couple of rickety, ready-for-junkyard desks, and severed coils of telephone cables. Pan Peninsular no longer existed, as far as I could tell, except for the name neatly stenciled on the rippled glass door.

The TV flickered color into the otherwise dark living room of my apartment as I entered. In the strange strobe-like light, Kate's gaunt face looked stark and stony. She turned to me as I closed the door and said without greeting, "Garden City Medical Center called while you were gone. That check you sent them on your Uncle Dan's account bounced."

I went purposefully into the kitchen, poured myself a big shot of Jack Daniel's black, and rescued a bottle of Stroh's from the refrigerator. Back in the liv-

ing room I saw that Kate wasn't drinking—a bad sign. I said, "Where's the boy?"

"Sleeping in your bed. He fell asleep about eight, after wiping out your Oreo supply, two hot dogs, and an entire can of pork and beans. God, if my kids had eaten like that . . . What's with your checking account lately, anyway? You underfinanced, or something?"

"Nah, that's not it," I said absently. I sat down at the other end of the couch from her and noted that she made no move to slide down and join me. In a feeble attempt to get past our awkwardness, I told her what I'd found out—which amounted to a big fat zero. I finished, "So Crane's a big phony. The only question is, what was his game and where did he go? Hopefully, Lansing will get me some information tonight. Maybe I'll get it ironed out and get the kid back home tomorrow."

"And if not you can call the cops," she said flatly.

I got the telephone off the hi-fi cabinet, sat on the couch, shucked my shoes, and dialed Lansing. My friend picked the phone up before the second ring.

"Pan Peninsular's a shell, Ben," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"It's hollow. Business license and incorporation papers only. No assets, no taxes, the officers

are professional front guys. The outfit, as far as the state of Michigan is concerned, is a company in name only."

"Okay, kid, do me some blue-sky. In your experience, what does this mean?"

There was a brief hissing of long distance silence and then she said, "All right, but this is off the record."

"Always. Always."

"It's one of two things," she said slowly. "Either it's an organization front, for laundering money or something, or . . . just maybe . . . it's a government front, one of those sting operations. I've seen it happen both ways. You get enough official paper to stand a cursory inspection, and go from there."

I got my last cigar out of my shirt pocket and lighted it from a wood match struck against my thumbnail. The smoke showed translucent gray, like a navy ship, in the light of the TV set. "Anything more you can tell me? Who do I talk to now?"

She laughed. "Either the organization or someone in Justice. You know the players better than I do, Ben."

"I hear you. Thanks, kid."

"Listen, for this you owe me London Chop House."

"And here I had a nice A & W Root Beer all picked out for you."

I heard her laugh as I hung

up. Kate was watching *The Dukes of Hazzard* and I pondered for a moment. Sure, I knew the players all right, but it had to be approached with great precision. Finally I picked up the phone, searched my memory, and dialed tentatively. My contact wasn't available, which was the routine; I hung up and a few minutes later the phone rang. I snatched it up. My contact was upset, highly upset. He spoke in that business-speak dialect that indicated he was worried about my phone's being tapped, despite the number of years he's known me.

I gave him a few pieces of information, but didn't muscle him, partly because I've never needed to, and partly because it wouldn't have worked. My strongest selling point was that Pan Peninsular had closed up shop and Crane had disappeared, so it was old business and there was no reason not to give me the story. My contact hemmed and hawed and then certified to me that Chuck Crane was not known among his colleagues, in either the Detroit or Pontiac operations, and that there had been no business involving such a person. I hung up, knowing that the next call would tell the tale.

The *Dukes* were on commercial. Kate stirred and said, "You know, it's a pity."

"What's that, kid?"

"We're alone in the room and you're not even here."

Hell of a time for heavy mysteries. "Look, it's late and I've got a few more calls to make, okay?"

She shrugged. I picked up the phone again and called the highest police authority I knew, Detective Captain Elvin Dance of the Detroit police department.

I first got to know Elvin when he was a strikebreaker with one of the car companies in the early sixties. Fortunately, he went legit after that and joined the police department and did very well for himself. To no one's surprise. Elvin is a good, solid, practical cop, half politician and half lawman, a remarkable combination for a man who grew up in a slum and earned his Ph.D. at night at Wayne State. He was on duty, which wasn't unusual, and at his desk, which was.

"Run that by one more time, Ben."

"What I said was," I said distinctly, "you find whoever you have to and tell them I know about Crane and the sting operation he was running. I don't know what his game was and I don't care. All I want to know is where the man is." I felt my heart pounding. "Or I'll go to every media organ in town and turn them loose on it. Confidentiality guaranteed. This is in-

formation for a client of mine not involved in the business."

"You know, Ben," he said, his voice a coarse growl, "there's been some heavy federal action round here lately. Mucho sensitive. How much of that big nose of yours you want whacked off? I'm just asking, as a friend of yours."

I said, "You get the word out now. I want a call back from a top player tonight. That happens, and nothing further gets said to anybody."

He sighed, "I'll look into it, man."

The Duke boys were headed toward their showdown with the Boss, and I didn't feel welcome to interrupt. Instead I morosely smoked my cigar, thinking about the downside: red lights in the parking lot, handcuffs on the wrists, the fast hustle to the waiting car, the grim professional faces firing tough professional questions. I'd come close to it before, but usually for better reasons than helping a selfish, strong-willed, adrenaline junkie.

And the phone rang. I picked it up with a slippery hand. It was Bill Scozzafava, the bartender at my local watering hole, Under New Management.

"You ever heard of uttering and publishing, stupid?"

It was his polite and legal way of informing me that one of my

Detroit Bank drafts had gone rubber on him. I smoothed him over, promising him cash money the next day. I cut off the conversation as quickly as I could and hung up. I was getting tired and my mind was wandering and it seemed like only moments later when the phone rang again.

The voice was, as might be expected, unknown to me. Anonymous, masculine, bland, purposeful. It said, "You have made inquiries about a man named Crane. You have made certain guarantees. We accept the guarantees because we have the means to enforce them, as you probably recall from your encounter with us in the late sixties. What you need to know about the story is as follows. . . ."

When I hung up, Kate was gone. I found her sleeping with Will in my bed. It was a pretty picture.

I went back to the living room and with thick fingers punched out Charlotte's number. Her answering machine gave a perky spiel and when the tone sounded I told her to meet me at the Belle Isle fountain at seven. Good a place as any.

I found a thin summer blanket in my linen closet and wrapped it around me like a shroud and fell into an awkward and restless sleep on the couch.

* * *

She wore a white blouse open to the breasts and white deck pants over white sandals, and she sat on the rim of the defunct Belle Isle fountain. A short distance away on the curving drive was a knee-high stainless steel DeLorean that I assumed was hers. I parked behind it and walked over to her. The sun was rising over Windsor to the south, bathing her white-blond hair and casting ambivalent shadows of darkness and light over the pathetic grandeur of the dry fountain. I sat down a piece away from her and lighted a cigar, filling my rusted mouth and lungs with good coarse smoke.

"You owe me a name."

With an amused and triumphant look, she retorted, "You owe me the story."

"Know anybody in cocaine, Charlotte?"

She squinted into the sun and smiled at me, her impossibly white and even teeth glinting in the new sun.

"Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"I'm talking traffic, not the trendy geeks into an occasional party snort."

"You know me," she said smugly. "I only deal with the top people in any field."

"Seen any of them around lately?" I asked wearily.

In the silence she slowly

straightened and began, by God, to look a little uncertain. "No, it's gotten pretty quiet. What are you getting at, Ben?"

"Your friend Crane was D. E. A. That's Drug Enforcement Administration, the Justice arm that handles drugs, since the F. B. I. has never had jurisdiction in that particular area. Crane's part of a real small, elite group. They're called the Flying Squad. They're moles, Charlotte. They move into an area and live three, four, five years undercover. They work their way into the drug traffic, build the book on the top people in it, turn the case, and disappear. They never even stay around to testify, their work is that thorough. They don't have names. They don't have real identities or lives. The case is their whole life."

I hadn't noticed it before, but the sharp uncaring sunlight was showing a pattern of lines and creases in her face that wasn't there twelve years ago. Apparently the years hadn't been any kinder to her than I was. It occurred to me how vital her flip, arrogant attitude was to her good looks. She said flatly, "So he busted them."

"He's in St. Louis now, burrowing his way in. You'll never see him again. It wasn't real to him, Charlotte, it was just a case and you were part of it."

She stood up angrily. "It was more than that to him. Believe me, I know." She thought of something. "After all, he protected me. He didn't turn me in with the rest."

She was asking for it and I didn't hesitate to give it to her. "You're a dilettante, Charlotte. A thrill-seeking groupie. He's a pro and he sized you up right away. He knew, with your social connections, he could ride you right into the mainstream. But once he had the case nailed down, you were nothing to him any more. He got the principals but didn't bother with you because you were nothing but small fry. And guys like him have no use for small fry."

She smiled, but it was forced, the bright light extinguished. "You know," she said, cocking her head to one side as she narrowed her eyes, "I had other reasons for wanting to see you. The assignment wasn't the only thing. I did care for you—"

"You didn't care for me. You loved my game. The union, the scandal, the investigation, the notoriety. I finally worked that out for myself, when I was trying to deal with the fact that you ran like a rat when my back was to the wall. You wanted the game but you couldn't take the heat."

"No," she shouted, her face lean and ugly, "I left because

you were just what you are now: nothing! Look at you! A maintenance man and . . . and a detective! All you've gotten is older. You haven't gotten anywhere, after all these years, haven't achieved a thing, just another flunky."

"As opposed to you, presumably."

After a long silence, she nodded abruptly and hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her pants. "Well, I got what I wanted." She took a step to go, then hesitated. "I wish I hadn't had to use the kid to muscle you, but the results speak for themselves. His mother will be out at your place this morning to pick Will up. She'll never speak to me again, of course, but that's not a big price to pay."

She turned. "Goodbye, Ben."

"Just a minute," I said roughly, taking her arm. She turned, her blue eyes directed indifferently at me. "You're into this flunky for a day and some gas money. Call it two seventy-five and we're quits."

She smiled contemptuously, went into her purse, and counted out two C-notes and four twenties. I curled them into a stiff tube and stuck them into my shirt pocket, then fished out a crumpled five and gave it to her. Without another word or look, I headed back to my car. She called something that the rising

wind muffled. It might have been thanks but, knowing Charlotte, it probably wasn't.

The tension was electric in my kitchen. The boy was hunkered on his knees on one of my chairs at the small dinette, spooning Cheerios sloppily into his mouth. Kate was at the other end of the table, cupping a mug of coffee in her hands. And another woman sat between her and Will, a tall medium blonde with a long voluptuous figure and a Lady Diana haircut. She rose, a worried, uncertain smile on her face, and Kate said to me, "This is Will's mother, Ben. Carole Somers."

Mrs. Somers wore a one-piece denim dress that ended just below her knees, revealing elegant long legs beneath. Her eyes warmed up as she held out her hand and I shook it. "From what Kate's been telling me, Mr. Perkins, I owe you a ton of thanks—and a certain ex-friend a punch in the jaw." Despite the words, her dark brown eyes were merry, her smile as golden as her hair.

"Name's Ben, Carole. No thanks needed. Charlotte mentioned you were an old friend of hers?" I let her hand go, still feeling its warmth in my palm.

The boy was giving me that radiant, adoring look again, and this wasn't lost on Carole, who

smiled. "Past tense, for sure. You too?"

"With seniority," I grinned. Kate sat straight-faced, watching me as I poured myself a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter. "You leave the boy with her often?"

Carole shrugged. "Once in a while, when I have to travel. When I got in at Metro this morning there was a message from her telling me where to pick Will up. I was curious but not alarmed. Not until Kate told me the story." She gave the boy a smile. "You sure took good care of him."

"It was Kate," I admitted.

"No trouble," Kate shrugged.

"See cookie," Will announced.

"We're all out," Kate said.

"This kid and cookies—"

"Oh, that's not what he means," Carole laughed. "He watches *Sesame Street* and that's a song the Cookie Monster sings. 'C is for Cookie, that's good enough for me.'"

Kate wasn't exactly mirthful that morning, but she laughed with us at that. Carole got up then, gathered up Will, and headed for the door. I followed her and found out as she thanked me effusively that she lived in Berkley and wanted to keep in touch with me. Well, that made two of us.

Back in the kitchen, Kate handed me the phone, which I

hadn't heard ring. "Detroit Bank."

The lady was very upset with me. I bank by mail, mainly, and I'd sent in a couple of payroll checks and forgotten to endorse them. They promptly mailed them back for endorsement, but since I'm pretty lazy and don't open my mail more than once a week, I didn't know what had gone wrong until the bank, nervous, began bouncing my checks all over the place. I endured the lecture, promised to stop in and correct the problem, and hung up.

Kate was at the door, lugging her overnight bag. "What do you say?" she asked lightly.

Theoretically, after six years, plenty. But I inquired, "What about That Jerk?"

"He's probably given up by now. If not, I'll run him off. God knows I've done it before." She

opened the door and turned to me, at the very edge of her composure. "Isn't it the damndest thing. C is for Cookie. Sometimes we forget." Then she hefted her bag and left quickly.

I shut the door and thought that, if she'd stayed, I'd probably have replied that C also stands for cocaine, checks, conspiracies. But I've found that you usually don't get to say everything you want to during the famous final scene.

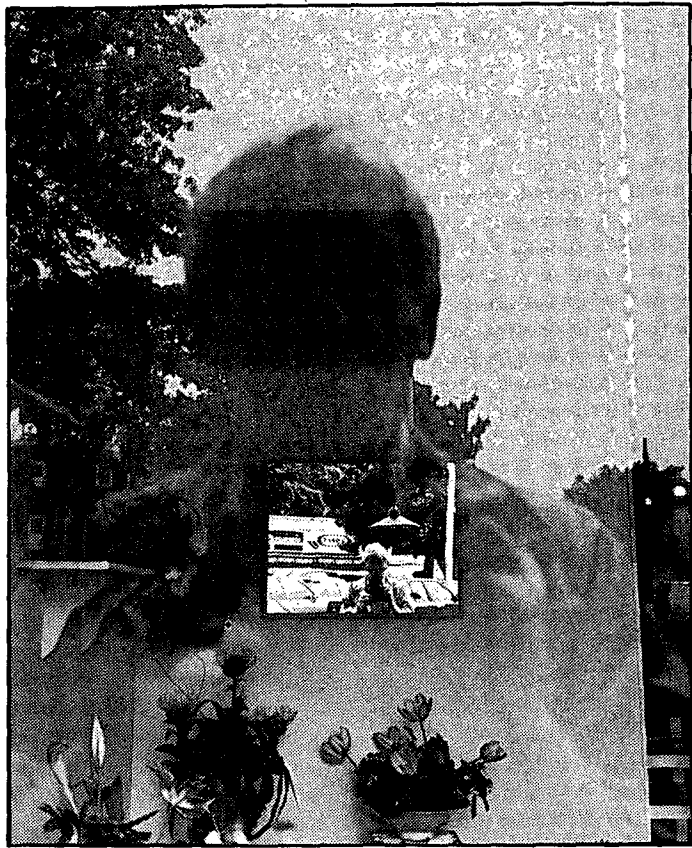
I suppose you could say that I netted out on the deal. Kate was gone, but there was Carole, whom I saw a lot of in the time that followed. And I made friends with a damned nice little kid, my first brush with domesticity.

Ironic, I guess.

Charlotte wanted something badly but didn't get it. I came into the situation not wanting or expecting anything, but got plenty. And got paid besides.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

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The look-in. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 283.

The Quarter Banks Company

by Dan Crawford

“**W**hy may that not be the skull of a lawyer?” demanded the man riding at my right.

“It is, it is!” cried the woman driving the cart. “Hie, hence, be gone away!”

“Where’s his quips, his quiddities, his cases, his tenors, and his tricks?”

“It is the lark that sings so out of tune!”

The head directly in front of me tried to contract into the shoulders behind it. “Don’t fret, Batears,” I murmured, patting the shrinking neck. “The curtain’s got to come down sometime.”

Batears and I have never been all that close, save for those occasions when I have had to pawn his saddle and blanket. I feel I was cheated when told he was a horse, and he feels I was similarly guilty of misrepresentation to call myself a rider. Still, I had to sympathize. My ears were in pain, and if his pain was proportionate to his ears, a mere broken neck resulting from an attempt to hide his head would be a child’s dream of a star by comparison.

“Hey, Hamlet!” I called. “Prithee, dost look like a town up ahead?”

Startled back into the here and now, the Prince of Denmark reined in to take a look around. He was a large, square man with red dundrearies that flowed down his cheeks and lapped over onto broad shoulders, perhaps to make up for a lack of hair on his sunburnt dome. He wore a sombre traveling costume of red, black, and yellow, with a few imitation silver ornaments here, there, and all about.

A smile of satisfaction spread across his rosy cheeks. The land dipped into hills and valleys seemingly at random, so the landscape was a little difficult to keep track of. But against rolling grey clouds, which we hoped would roll right past us, we could clearly see thin plumes of smoke indicating the presence of some kind of community.

“Excellent, sir, excellent!” boomed our Hamlet. “It can’t be above



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SO THE LANDSCAPE WAS A LITTLE DIFFICULT TO KEEP TRACK OF.

three miles from here! You are an excellent guide, sir; we may arrive in time for an evening show!"

"I'd have said five miles, Father," said his partner. "But if we hurry, there might be time for two shows."

Even without her hint, you'd have known the fair Juliet to be related to our Hamlet, being just a bit taller, a bit redder of hair, and somewhat broader of shoulder. I had not been privileged, at this point, to see her on the stage, but I could tell she was one who would provide a dominating presence. The only performer I ever encountered who compared with her had been standing in an enclosure at a county fair, offering to wrestle any comer for a five dollar purse. Juliet had not been there at the time, and would never, in any case, have stooped to so low an exhibition. Which was fortunate for the man and his five dollars.

"But we must make haste," said Hamlet, urging his horse forward again. "Alas, that we have not our full company! It must be a program of mere orations!"

"We'll make a recover, Father," she assured him as the wagon started to rattle down the path.

He didn't hear her, but it wasn't the fault of the wagon. His mind on the show to come, he was Hamlet once more, running through his lines. "Whose grave's this, sirrah?"

And his daughter, Juliet once more, stated, "It is my lady mother. Is she not down so late, or up so early?"

Batears retracted his neck some more, and I hunched mine. As thespians, the Banks family's talent was largely that of making every consonant felt in the last aisle in the house. Well, it kept the rattlesnakes off our trail.

They were hard on my eardrums, but I could sympathize with this pair of traveling artistes. Like them, I had been brought to this pass by the deplorable decline of the arts in the United States of America.

Once I had been a newspaperman of fame and following, reporting to breathless readers all the latest outrages of Indian and outlaw against the forces of civilization along the Great Frontier. Then some peapod came along with the telegraph, and my art was bypassed by accounts written by yokels who had actually been west of the Hudson. I felt these stories by mere witnesses lacked professional polish, but my editors fell prey to the allure of novelty and I was set at liberty. Determined to regain my former fame, I had

set off to the wild and woolly to see some of the country I had spent my career describing.

So far, I had failed to make my name and, more importantly, my fortune. A few trifling local stories, printed in whatever newspaper office the half-horse towns I passed through possessed, and one or two thrilling accounts currently available in inexpensive editions with stirring yellow covers were all I had to my credit. (These are edifying tales all, I may tell you, in which virtue triumphs not once but several times, and love conquers all, all for the same nickel; buy one now while they're still in stock.) I had to press on into wilder lands in search of some atrocity deserving of national attention.

I had been approaching a town that had seen fit to call itself Paula's Pocket when I observed a man in a cape and plumed hat galloping hell-for-leather across country. This happens. But he was closely followed by a wagon, whose tall driver wore a flowing gown and flowered veil. In my business, you learn to notice these things. I followed, suspecting there was a story somewhere in the vicinity.

They were not apparently surprised to see me giving chase. Speed and motivation were on their side, since Batears possesses neither. I might have lost them forever except for the landscape, which is not so much treacherous in this territory as it is mischievous. Promising roads turn into rough mining tracks and then come to a dead end, just as the mines did. A gently rolling hill will reveal, on closer examination, an array of sharp gullies you didn't even suspect from thirty yards off. And twilight was coming on.

What they had taken for a path to safety was actually a dry streambed. Not more than a mile from where I picked them up, they reached a spot in which depth and relative dampness had allowed bushes and a couple of scrubby trees to spring up. Man and horse could have jumped through this wilderness, or turned up the bank and gotten away. But the wagon couldn't have followed. They paused to consider their options, and that was when I had time to catch up.

They were very nearly the last things I ever caught. The man whipped out a sword that hung at his belt and, brandishing it, shouted, "Do your worst, villain! We shall sell our lives dearly!"

I was not unarmed myself, but as I say, my profession has taught me to be observant, and I noticed that the strapping young female in the wagon had produced a shotgun.

"I'm no villain!" I announced, as my hands flew up into the air. "Ask my friends!" Batears grunted.

No one was impressed to the extent of lowering a weapon. "How far behind you is the rest of the village?" demanded the man, his blade slicing the air into cutlets and tenderloin.

"I have no idea," I said. "I left the town where I saw it."

"Is there no one following you?" the woman asked.

"Look at my horse," I urged. "If anyone was behind me, they passed me."

The shotgun did come down just a bit. "You see, Father? I told you everyone would follow Stephen, that naughty, knavish villain."

She let her person-perforator rest in her lap, but I felt it would be a nice compliment if I left my hands above my ears until the sword was gone. "Were you, er, expecting the town to join you?" I inquired. "If I'm interrupting a private party, I'll just run along."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You did not, sir, just come from town?"

"If you mean Paula's Pocket," I said, "I've never been there. I don't believe now that I'll go there at all. I don't like the look of it: not my sort of town at all, Paula's Pocket. Unfriendly, irrelevant, lacking in refinement, and wholly unnecessary."

The sword slid into its sheath with a bang. "Lacking in refinement!" cried the swordsman. "Exactly, sir! Precisely! A less refined collection of yokels it has never been my misfortune to meet. Shakespeare is beyond them, sir; a group that would mock a performance of *Julius Caesar* is capable of any crimes."

"Villainous," I said, letting my arms drop.

The man threw his chin back. "Receipts were so low that the company grew despondent. They were well served, I say, when Edgar, our manager, in a fit of alcohol-induced melancholy, broke all the windows in their town hall. I do not say he was justified in then setting it alight: I am a fair man. Even a settlement so contemptuous of the bard ought to be allowed some sort of civic center."

"Big of you, sir," I said.

He nodded and jumped down to check the wagon. "I strive never to be petty," he admitted. "They had a perfect right to arrest Edgar."

"But some people can never be satisfied," said the woman. "Their outrage became adhesive. They wanted to spread the benefits of their private penitentiary among all members of the troupe. Their opinion of show people is low; they felt that one alone could not

have burned down their town hall, that it had taken the whole company. We decided it would be best to disband the company and go our separate ways, and fairly immediately, too. How do you suppose we can get out of this, Father?"

I was afraid he'd think of an answer and he did. Much of the language we used during the process of getting wagon and horse turned around was hardly Shakespearean, so I do not set it down here. Still, it brought us together and made us all good friends. I learned that I was in the presence of the sole and only Mr. Eugene Banks and his daughter, the fair Sophronia, who trod the boards under the name Miss Daintyfield for reasons which no doubt seemed good to her at the time. They traveled from town to town bringing portable culture to the frontier. Once on the road again, they asked me to come along.

Not, I hasten to state, because they detected hitherto unsuspected dramatic talent in me. But they judged, rightly, that I looked like a desperate character, and might scare away highwaymen and other malefactors along the way. The state of my finances at this time was such that I had not found the leisure to shave, bathe, or change my clothes in nearly five weeks. This can be more of a social disadvantage than it might seem to those who know this region only from the covers of newsstand novels. In established settlements, a man who looks this way is hinted off by uniformed men who mention the vagrancy laws. In rougher municipalities, they run you right out of town without any shillyshallying. Never mind that everyone else looks just like you. They know how sneaky they are themselves, and they don't need any outside competition.

I inquired after salary. They admitted that they had a little cash, but they wanted to conserve it. I would be paid just as soon as box office receipts amounted to more than they had any immediate need for. I do not, in general, work for air wages. But I learned that they also possessed a pound or so of bacon, which they did not intend to conserve, and the same of coffee. So I agreed to act as bodyguard for a while. In any case, this theatrical wandering was a novelty to me, and it was possible that I might think of something amusing to write about it for the newspapers back east.

I thought of many things over the next four days, few of them amusing and none of them something that could be printed by the newspapers back east. The life of a showman is hard. The life of a showman's bodyguard is unbearable. Mr. Banks and the fair Sophronia honed their talents by constant rehearsal, inevitably at

the height of their lungs. Mr. Banks could play any Shakespearean hero he cared to name. The fair Sophronia was similarly versatile, though she leaned heavily to Juliet. Her Juliet was distinctive, if nothing else, for she punctuated the speeches of the Bard with verses of a sad little ballad called "There's a Flickering Light in the Window of Love." This was a composition of her own, to which she often added a new verse, without marked improvement.

When they did not rehearse, they worked on the business half of show business. I, as hanger-on, was expected to second all notions, and agree with a vast deal of optimism in which I had no personal share. Like all artists, Mr. Banks and his daughter were persons of great vision. There would be a new company, to be called the Quarter Banks Show and Repertory Company. It would consist of eight regular players, two of whom would be the Banks family. (Hence the name, you see.) They would present Shakespeare, Marlowe, and, should an orchestra become available, light opera.

"Of all the great performers I have seen," said Mr. Banks to me, "I have always given the greatest honor and respect to . . . myself. Only the truly shy and modest can understand how it pains me to have to admit my supremacy. Yet it behooves a man to know his limitations, if any, and on such occasions that the Quarter Banks Company presented unparalleled and unapproached opera, I would act solely as manager. I do not myself, alas, sing, sir."

I recall that I made some remark about heredity which he somehow took as a compliment. "Yes," he agreed, "Sophronia has her fair mother's voice."

"Does she?" I inquired, refraining, with true nobility, from suggesting that the lady had been glad to get rid of it.

"She does indeed," he replied, with a wave of one hand toward his blushing daughter. (She was rehearsing these blushes for her next performance as Juliet.) "Such tone! Such power!"

"With great power comes great responsibility," I said. He was so tickled by this that he resolved to add it to his next performance of *Julius Caesar*, and promised me a slightly larger percentage of the take.

Now that we had finally sighted a town, I was terrified that I might actually witness a Banks *Julius Caesar*, and yet relieved that at least I would be free of rehearsals for awhile. The Banks family grew silent as we neared the metropolis, unwilling to give any Shakespeare away to nonpaying customers.

It was a well-built, established town: the main buildings right

up against the street were made mostly of wood, and the curlicued lettering of the signs hinted at the presence of a professional sign painter. These signs proclaimed the most impressive buildings to be the Grandison Bank, or the Grandison Hotel, or the Grandison Saloon. From this, I judged that the town was named Grandison, or else the Grandison family was mighty numerous in this county.

While we studied Grandison, Grandison studied us. We were something to see. One hill away from the city limits, Mr. Banks and his fair daughter had paused to brush off their dust and switch their traveling hats for something brighter, something with more elegant plumes. (I did not, myself, indulge in this freshening up, since I was fresh out of ostrich plumes and remembered I had been hired to look disreputable.) We attracted plenty of stares, for even the Banks horses appreciated an audience and had been taught to strut. There were no cheers, which somewhat offended Mr. Banks.

"But news travels so poorly, Father, in these outlying regions," Sophronia reminded him. "One may say it crawls." Mr. Banks was forced to agree this once, though he obviously still felt it was a disgraceful state of affairs.

I followed slightly behind the heads of the company, so could not see what they saw ahead of us. But I knew when they saw it. Broad shoulders sagged, the horses slowed to a halt, and even the ostrich plumes seemed to wilt some. Shoving Batears a little forward, I peered around my employers at a great and grandiose brown and white structure. This bright building bore two signs. One proclaimed "GRANDISON THEATER."

The other, in even larger letters, announced, "CLOSED."

To the left of this second sign sagged a lean and hungry man in black leather garments rather too large for him. A whip was coiled at his hip. In all, he reminded me of my primary schoolteacher when I used to hand in my penmanship exercises. I can't say whether this was because of the underfed frame, the mournful expression, or the whip.

We pressed forward a bit and came to another halt at the rail out front. The long, gloomy soul raised his head, with some effort. "They're closed," he said, in case we couldn't make out the fine print.

"Temporarily, I hope, sir?" boomed Mr. Banks, with a hearty optimism that was wholly feigned.

The man's head sagged again. "Marooned!" he growled. "A man of my stature!"

"We sympathize, sir," said the soft-hearted Sophronia. "No doubt you had seats in the balcony for tonight's show? What, exactly . . ."

"Probably better off without them," he grumbled.

"That's the spirit, sir!" crowed Mr. Banks, tossing one hand into the air. "Who needs them? Indeed, I hear that the company coming into town puts on an exhibition that will make theirs look like a matchstick in water, sir! Where can we find . . ."

"After touring the territory for months," our cheerful host went on, "to ever-increasing acclaim: deserted. There's no reward for the artist."

The perceptive Mr. Banks now realized we were in the presence of a colleague. "Well, sir, we all suffer reverses from time to time," he said. "Be of good cheer: reward always comes to the true artist, if he but persevere!"

"Perseverance!" agreed the fair Sophronia. "There's your cure, sir! Smile and speak your piece, trippingly perhaps: the show will go on!"

There was some more in this vein; I was not surprised to learn that the Bankses had cheered up despondent and impoverished actors before. But our companion did not brighten at all until Mr. Banks mentioned something about a little lunch.

We were not regarded with any favor at the eating establishment we entered. Payment was demanded in advance, at which Mr. Banks bridled. It was not, however, a situation new to him, and he did pay, once he had delivered a stinging opinion of the proprietor's lack of faith in humankind.

Around mouthfuls of beans and shaved beef we were brought up to date on the state of the arts in Grandison. Our guest was one Michael McGuire, late of Kelsey's Mighty Theatrical Exhibitions, which had been thrilling audiences with its *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for months. I take leave to doubt the thrill. The underfed Mr. McGuire had starred as the brutish Simon Legree, and if the rest of the company was as physically suited to its rôle, I am unsurprised that they had to turn to crime to show a profit. They had decamped five nights ago with the box office receipts, leaving behind Michael McGuire, perhaps because it is so hard to divide money by seven, or perhaps in partial restitution to the theater's owners. Said owners had not been gratified, and had left town immediately afterward, having been counting on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to pay their debts to the merchants of Grandison. Michael McGuire had been pitched into jail for awhile, but was finally released for being gen-

erally irrelevant. The judge told him no stain could be attached to his character for this incident; it would remain stained by the fact of his being an actor. And that, said the judge, apparently having seen the show, was not a noticeable stain.

Michael McGuire grew sadder and sadder as he told this story, but both Mr. Banks and his fair daughter were fair bursting with glee. "Why, sir!" cried the proprietor of the Quarter Banks Company, "this is just such an opportunity as many better men would die for!"

Michael McGuire was confused both by the enthusiasm and by the proposition that there might be better men than Michael McGuire. But as Mr. Banks explained it to him, he rose up in his seat and even attempted a smile. This failed, from lack of practice, but we all took the thought for the deed. The bargain was struck at once. Michael McGuire was certain he could pick up Shakespeare in no time at all.

"Particularly with someone so intelligent to coach me in the lines," he said, casting his eyes upon the fair Sophronia. "We . . ."

An ululation of intense pain rolled through the building and rattled the plates. Every customer in the place abandoned beans and beef to dash to the door. Back at the Grandison Theater, what seemed to be a mouth and chest mounted atop a shiny pair of boots was wailing at the top of its lungs. A crowd was developing around this little figure, so we sauntered over to join it.

Mouth, chest, and boots were parts of a smallish man with shiny black hair and a long, curling mustache. His eyes were closed, and his head was thrown back as he cried out in the throes of overpowering grief.

"Poor man," said a matron in the assembled spectators. "Don't cry." The head came down a bit and the eyes opened. The little man looked around to find the source of the consolation.

"No, no, no, mademoiselle," he corrected her. "Me, I do not weep. Henri de Balbelais is more stronger than that." He thumped his chest with one fist, producing an impressive boom. "I sing, sing to relieve my feelings. Alas, I am ruin! Ruin!"

"Ruined?" asked a member of the audience. "How?"

He thumped his chest again. "Me, I am Henri de Balbelais, the great tenor! I am contract to appear at this theater for a time strictly limit, bringing the splendor of the music French to these good people. My last centime I have expend to come to this place, and now I find that the theater, she is close! Ah, I am ruin!"

He threw his head back, but his eyes slid back and forth, checking to see how many eyes had tears in them, and who had the largest hat to pass. But the crowd was already starting to break up. Show folk were out of fashion in Grandison. Men, women, and children moved off to whatever they were doing before they heard his siren song. A passerby gave the great tenor a nudge.

"Whodya think yer . . ." M. de Balbelais demanded, before he remembered he was French.

And it was well for him that he did, for this passerby wore a badge. "Move along, mister," said the peace officer. "We don't need any playacting on the sidewalk just because the theater's closed."

"One moment, good sir!" called Mr. Banks. M. de Balbelais looked up with hope, the lawman with mild interest. As the president of the Quarter Banks Company moved forward, the mild interest grew to outright curiosity, bordering on amusement. There's something about a plumed hat that lends distinction to a man.

"Is there no prospect," cried the showman to the lawman, "no possibility that the Grandison Theater might be reopened in the event of the arrival of a group of nationally famous performers? In this way, the owners of this establishment might be allowed to recoup their losses, even in their absence, and pay off their outstanding debt? I do not refer to the obvious cultural benefits of such a plan, as they would certainly be obvious to a man of your intelligence."

But this officer of the law was either a man of less intelligence than Mr. Banks judged, or else felt no responsibility to help the theater owners of Grandison. "We've had enough of that in this town," he said, with an eye to some of the voters walking past. "It was a judgment on us for allowing such sinful exhibitions in the first place. The building's been sold, and the new owner's putting in a saloon, as God intended."

Sophronia Banks opened her mouth to object, but the lawman went on, "The judgment was on the company that ran off, too. We found 'em six miles north of town, what was left of 'em. Figure it was Gaptooth Tom's bunch of owlhoots. Served 'em right: what you steal gets stolen. Were you thinking about staying in town long, mister?" In the face of so blatant a hint, there was nothing to do but move along, preferably in some other direction than that taken by our predecessors.

When we set off, in a more or less westerly way, there were five of us, as Mr. Banks could not pass up a chance to engage a great

French tenor. Michael McGuire was less than pleased with this addition, but the two men had equal opportunity since, being horseless, both had to ride in the wagon being driven by the fair Sophronia. I felt M. de Balbelais had something of an edge, since he and Miss Banks shared an interest in music, or whatever it was. He would unleash a bit of an aria, and she would respond with a chorus of "There's a Flickering Light in the Window of Love." I feared violent jealousy, but either the two men realized we were dependent on each other for income, or boredom overcame passion in their manly chests.

Mr. Banks rode close to the wagon, not to chaperone but to rehearse. Michael McGuire was to appear as Iago, Horatio, or MacDuff; Mr. Banks had not made up his mind about it yet. Inspired by M. de Balbelais, Michael McGuire showed that what he lacked in girth, he made up in lung power. On occasion, he even drowned out M. de Balbelais, both Bankses, and the thunder.

The rolling clouds had started to unroll their contents shortly after we left Grandison, and treated us to an exhibition as consistent in its own way as the Quarter Banks Company's own performances. And the weather did not pause for intermissions, but put on continuous performances all the rest of the day.

What with that, and Shakespeare, and "There's a Flickering Light in the Window of Love," I hardly know when I've enjoyed myself more. My nose is undecorative at the best of times, but watching water drip from it hour after hour is tedious even when done to the strains of *The Barber of Seville*. On occasion, I feel my hair is growing scarce, but filled with water, it weighed on my throbbing head until I wished it all, with the entire Quarter Banks Company, into a grave, a little, little grave.

As night darkened an already gloomy world, I started to look around for a campsite that wouldn't drown us too readily. There were plenty of cracks in the hills around us, most of which looked to me like flash flood territory. I was debating the possibilities of camping the Quarter Banks Company in a gully while I kept lookout on high ground when the fair Sophronia let out a yell that was not from Shakespeare.

We all stared into the particular shadow she was indicating. For a moment, I thought water on the brain and too many choruses of "There's a Flickering Light in the Window of Love" had brought on hallucinations. But I stared a little harder and the flickering light was still there. It fell to me to investigate, inasmuch as the

rest of the company had been working hard all afternoon while I had simply basked in the artistic expression around me. I jumped off Batears, requested the company to see that he was given to my cousin Mick (whom I never much liked) if I didn't get back, and waded through the mud.

The shack was not a piece of prime real estate, but it did have a roof and walls. I slithered up on all fours, so as not to present too easy a target, and peeked into one of a hundred improvised windows that had formed in and among the planks and paper of the walls.

The roof was apparently just as well made as the walls: the black stove sizzled as the weather intruded on it from above. Most of the light came from a cracked lantern sitting in the middle of a similarly cracked table. Three men were deposited around this table. A barrel-shaped soul slumped in his chair, his head hanging forward so as to be ready in case he decided to bite something. A drip of water hit him from the ceiling; he shook it off like a bull bothered by flies. Across the table from him, tossing down cards, sat a little fellow with a big nose and one gold earring. He had no hair, and, in fact, very little head above the eyebrows. He smiled a great deal, but I can't say he seemed to be very cheerful about it. Standing up, a tall man lacking one ear glared at the door, or back at his companions whenever they spoke too loudly, breathed too loudly, or moved.

A line of killing things hung at every man's belt. Not one man ever had either hand more than one inch from some weapon at any time. And it wasn't because they suspected a desperate character like me was sneaking up on them.

It wasn't so much that their conversation was controversial, either.

"Rain."

"Not my fault it's raining."

"Been raining all day."

"Not my fault."

"Feels like a week since we been out."

"We'll get out."

"Can't. Rain."

You could tell they'd had this conversation before. Even the little moves toward a knife or a gun looked as though they'd been rehearsed over and over. But hands were getting jerky, men were moving faster, more carelessly.

I crawled back through the mud to report that what we had here

was a group of undecorative characters with a bad case of cabin fever. I said that I could have stayed to learn a bit more, but this was all I wished to know about them.

Mr. Banks felt this was all that was necessary. "Excellent," he said, rubbing his hands together. "These are men who need entertainment, sir. In their gratitude for our brightening of their dreary night, they may well offer us a sizable reward, or, in any case, a place to sleep for the night."

"I don't believe that's what we'd be offered," I suggested.

He raised a hand. "Silence, sir! You have done your job well, and I am grateful, but you were not engaged to make policy decisions. Come, we must organize tonight's entertainment. We have no stage, and I could not blame them for being upset, were we to burst in to demand floor space."

"True enough," I said.

"Ah!" Our leader was struck with inspiration. "We have here four performers, and yon cabin has four walls. We will take up positions around the house: a performance surrounding its audience, rather than the other way around. Now for the show itself: we'll start with music, something soft, something soothing."

The glow in Sophronia's eyes would have made a strong man weak. I had already been feeling weak for some minutes.

The Quarter Banks Company moved into place. I had not been forgotten while Mr. Banks blocked out the stage business. I was to keep an eye on our crowd through a crack, so as to alert the troupe when the audience came out to give us an ovation. He did not specify which crack I was to watch, so I chose one that pointed back toward Grandison. I felt I could best be of service by running back toward town, in the case of emergency, so that someone would be alive to tell the tale and warn show companies who came after us that some audiences were tougher than others.

The card game had not advanced particularly. The conversation had not improved. At least Mr. Banks was correct in one respect: we were offering them a break in the monotony.

The opening number was, of course, "There's a Flickering Light in the Window of Love." The fair Sophronia started in low; her father wanted the entertainment to build slowly in volume.

But the tall man caught it right away. "What's that?"

His partners listened, but with a kind of annoyance at his changing the subject. "The wind," said the barrel with legs. "Been blowin' as long as it's been rainin'."

"I hear something," snarled the long man, a knife easing from its sheath.

"It's the wind!" said the round man, thumping the table and nearly tossing the lantern to the floor. "If you can't talk about anything else, turn in!"

"Ain't we gonna eat?" demanded the little fellow with the ear-ring.

"What is a man," roared Mr. Banks, "if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed?"

They all heard that, right enough. Three men were on their feet now, and every hand held a weapon. I nearly raised an alarm, but none of the men turned to step out the door. Instead, they stood where they were, looking left and right, none of them entirely sure that one of the others wasn't playing a joke.

"A beast! No more!" shouted the leader of the company as his daughter sang background ballads. "Sure, He that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after, gave us not that capability and godlike reason to rust in us unused!"

Having traveled with the company this long, I was somewhat inured to their work. These men had no such experience. This was a threat outside anything they had known before, and they didn't know how to meet it.

The big ape-shaped man picked up a jug from under the table and threw it against the wall, just to see if that helped. "What did you want to do that for?" demanded the little man, kicking his shins. So he picked up the little man and threw him next.

"A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom and ever three parts coward!" called the voice from outside.

The tall man turned away from where his two partners were tussling, and yelled, "Coward! Who said that?"

"That way the noise is!" screamed a voice from the other side of the shack. The tall man spun as it went on, "Tyrant, show thy face! If thou beest slain . . . beest slain . . ."

The table went to splinters as the fat man fell back on it. Across the cabin, a roaring whisper called, "If thou beest slain and with no stroke of mine!"

"If thou beest slain and with no stroke of mine," came an echo.

"My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still!"

"My wife and children's ghosts . . ."

"Ghosts!" echoed the tall man, whipping back and forth as the prompter and prompted went on with the speech. At that moment,

M. de Balbelais favored him with an aria opening on a note that was trying to be high C. He glanced just once at the two men struggling for a good grip on each other's throats. Then he snatched up the lantern and headed for the door.

Michael McGuire leaped to one side as the door slammed open. I doubt that the tall man even saw him. The light of the lantern fell on my wet and undoubtedly melancholy countenance.

The man gave one shriek and fell to the ground in a dead faint. I snatched up the lantern before the weather could get into it. Moving into the cabin, I kicked a small gentleman in the head as he rose from the body of his erstwhile partner. I hurt my toe, but it seemed to do the job.

Inside, we found a quantity of money and a trunk of fancy clothes that Michael McGuire seemed to recognize. After that, we located some rope and bundled the survivors into compact parcels, which we then loaded up and delivered to the officers of the law in Grandison.

With the reward money, the Quarter Banks Company has purchased the Grandison Theater from its new and uncultured owners, and intends to open with *Romeo and Juliet*. The role of Romeo had not yet been awarded when I left. Bets in Grandison were running about three to two on Michael McGuire. I was offered a position as publicist, meaning I would attend all performances free of charge, and write glowing reviews for the local newspaper.

I declined the position and took a little spot cash instead. I was too wild, I said, too independent a spirit to be tied down to the Quarter Banks Company. I value too highly my freedom.

And my sanity.

The Body Behind the Billboard

by C. B. Gilford

Lieutenant Challice was riding with Patrolman Damiano only three blocks from the scene when the call came through. In a vacant lot, somebody had reported, behind a billboard, lying amid the brush and the debris, there was the dead body of a girl.

Patrolman Damiano did a U-turn and flicked on the siren at the same time. Homeward bound traffic edged grudgingly out of their way. Lieutenant Challice checked his watch. Almost five thirty. But it had already been dark for more than half an hour. It had been only gray before that, and now big snowflakes were falling thickly. They melted as they hit, to gleam wetly on the streets and sidewalks. The windshield wipers, noisy till a moment ago, worked silently under the drone of the siren.

It was a nasty night and Challice didn't relish the idea of slopping around in a vacant lot. Somebody had been very inconsiderate.

The billboard loomed up first. The spotlight, playing toward it, revealed the unseasonable spectacle of a girl in a skimpy swim-

ming suit clutching a bottle of soda pop. Challice shivered.

Patrolman Damiano brought the car to a jolting halt and focused the spotlight on the knot of people behind the billboard. There were half a dozen or so of them, their morbid curiosity stronger than their dislike of the weather. At the approach of the cops, they stepped aside a little. Damiano shoved them a bit farther, and the lieutenant knelt to look at the thing on the ground.

Possibly she'd been pretty, but she wasn't now. She'd been strangled, which had been bad for her face and complexion. And Challice guessed—just a guess—that she hadn't been lying there very long. It couldn't have happened in daylight, even in gray daylight, even in a vacant lot behind a billboard. That meant the girl couldn't have been dead more than half an hour.

Her purse lay under her outflung arm. He removed the purse cautiously, then fished inside it by flashlight. From an identification card he found that the girl's name was Ann Frantz, and he got her address.

The second cruiser had arrived by then, and Challice gave quick instructions to Sergeant Rice. Get statements from the witnesses, especially whoever it was who discovered the body. Later you can begin asking in the stores and houses around here if anybody saw or heard anything. Clear the area and see what you can find on the ground, though probably everything's been trampled by this time. And take care of the corpse.

Then he returned to Damiano's car and explained to headquarters. He was going to the place the girl lived right away. It was only a couple of blocks. He was working on a hunch. But the body was still warm, and maybe the trail was, too. Maybe the girl had been waylaid by a perfect stranger, but then again maybe she hadn't. The purse was still with the body, and there was money in it. And the girl's clothing wasn't torn or anything like that. Just a hunch, but he was going to the girl's house.

He drove. The address turned out to be a large, begrimed brownstone residence that was undoubtedly a rooming house. Challice trotted through the wet and rang the bell. His ring was answered by a gaunt, sixtyish female in a man's sweater. He showed her his police identification right away.

"Ann Frantz live here?" he asked.

"Second floor back," she told him.

"Is she home now?"

"She left for work a little while ago."

"How long? Could you say exactly?"

"Maybe half an hour. What did she do? Is she in trouble?"

He told her Ann Frantz was dead. And he asked to be shown her room.

He was asked in and taken up the badly lighted front stairway. Then his hostess opened a door, flipped a wall switch, and indicated the small room. Challice went inside and glanced around.

He would come back later and make a thorough search. Right now he was interested only in getting a sort of feel for the case. His hunch about the time of death had been right. Now he was looking for something to ride the hunch on a little further. Like a man's picture, for instance.

But he was disappointed. The room was almost as bare and austere as a nun's cell. It offered no indication of the character of its former occupant. There was one picture on the dresser, of a girl and an older woman. Maybe Ann Frantz and her mother. Ann had been pretty enough, neat, almost prim. In the picture she wore a cloth coat.

"How long did she live here?" he asked the landlady.

"About six months now."

"What kind of a girl was she?"

"I don't know. She never talked much."

"Did she have any boy-friends?" That strangling job had been a man's work.

"I never saw any. If she had any, she met 'em somewhere else besides here. This is a respectable place."

"Nobody ever picked her up here?"

"I never saw anybody."

A dead end. Challice could feel his hunch playing out. "You said she was leaving for work," he said. "Where did she work?"

"Esquire Grill. She worked a split shift. She came home after lunch and went back to work just before dinner. Esquire Grill's on Weston, about Thirty-eighth—"

"I've seen the place," Challice said. The pattern was beginning to take shape a little. Ann Frantz had lived within walking distance of her job. There would be people who knew that, knew her habits and her route. Maybe a customer at the Esquire Grill.

"Thanks, and I'll be back," he told the landlady. "Lock this room up and don't let anybody in it."

He saw her lock it, and received her promise to keep it locked. Then he went down to

the car and drove to Thirty-eighth and Weston. On the way he passed the vacant lot. There were more cops there by now. He didn't stop.

The Esquire Grill turned out as he remembered it, a small, crummy place with eight counter stools and three tables. It was six o'clock now, dinner time for most people, but the Esquire Grill had only two customers. Maybe it was the fault of the weather, or maybe the place was off the beaten track. At any rate, Challice wondered why a nice-looking girl like Ann Frantz had to work here.

He parked right in front, and went in and took the first stool. The two customers, both men, occupied one of the farther stools and a chair at one of the tables. A large but not unattractive woman, possibly in her thirties, came down behind the counter and stood opposite the lieutenant. She looked suspicious. She had seen him climb out of a police car. But he showed her his identification anyway.

"Ann Frantz work here?" he asked.

"Yeah, but she ain't here now."

"I can see that. She's supposed to be here, though, isn't she?"

"She usually comes in about five. But she didn't show up today."

He glanced around at the emptiness of the place. "Why do

you bother hiring a waitress?" he wanted to know.

The woman wasn't insulted. "We do a rush business at breakfast and lunch," she explained. "I need her then. But she can show up at night if she wants to. Usually does. Gets her own dinner that way, you see. And she can meet her boyfriends here too." The woman gestured with a side movement of her head to the two male customers.

Challice would tackle the men when he got around to it. "What's your name?" he asked the woman.

"Fern Thomas."

"You own this place?"

"That's right."

"Now let me get this straight. You stay open all day, but Ann Frantz was in the habit of working till after lunch, took off in the afternoons, then came back in the evenings."

"That's right. Six days a week." The woman hesitated. She'd controlled her curiosity so far. Now finally she asked the question. "What's the deal, anyway? Something happen to Ann?"

He nodded. "She's dead."

Without waiting for Fern Thomas's reaction or next question, he got off the stool and took a couple of steps toward the two men. "Either one of you waiting for Ann Frantz?" he asked them.

They exchanged glances between themselves, and then the

man at the table said, "What's it to you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Challice. Police. Miss Frantz is dead."

The man at the table started to get out of his chair and say something, but changed his mind. Both of them just stared for a moment. Then came the stealthy glance between them again, but Challice couldn't read the meaning of it.

"You're kidding," the man on the stool said.

"She's lying in a vacant lot four blocks from here. There's no doubt about her being dead. Probably she was strangled. In other words, murdered. That's why I'm here."

Challice pulled out his notebook then and acquired some information. The man at the table was named Joe Wint. He was thirty-one years old, not married. He drove a transport truck, interstate. So he wasn't in town much. Yes, he dated Ann Frantz whenever he was in town, had been doing it for about three months, ever since she started working here at the Esquire Grill. This was Wednesday. He'd told Ann a week ago he'd be back on Wednesday, and they had a date for tonight. He was a big man, with broad, powerful shoulders and big hands. Kind of good looking in a rough way. Right now he didn't look like a truck driver. He was wearing a

neat blue suit under a tweed overcoat. There seemed to be no mud or other stains on his clothes. His shoes were slightly wet and soiled, but that could happen anywhere on a night like this.

"When did you arrive here?" Challice asked him.

"About twenty to six, I guess."

Fern Thomas, silently questioned, nodded her head in corroboration.

The other man called himself Paul Merson. Twenty-eight, also unmarried. He ate quite a few of his meals here, partly because he worked at the small electrical equipment factory two blocks over. Three nights a week he attended engineering school, and studied during a lot of his spare time. He had managed to date Ann Frantz on the average of two nights a week since she'd been working at the Esquire Grill. He was as tall as Joe Wint but not as heavy, weighed about a hundred and sixty. He was a man who worked with his hands, and they looked strong and capable. He wore glasses, and his face was plain and serious, neither handsome nor ugly. He was wearing a brown suit and a tan topcoat, neither quite as neat as Joe Wint's. But though his shoes were wet too, he showed no certain evidence of having been walking around in a vacant lot.

"When did you arrive here, Mr. Merson?" Challice asked.

"About five minutes before you did, lieutenant."

"Did you have a date with Miss Frantz?"

"Well, no. Wednesday night's a school night for me. I was hoping to see her though."

"Did you know she had another date tonight?"

"Yes, she told me she did. But Joe doesn't always show up. With the bad weather tonight, I was thinking he might not make it back in town."

"What would you have done if he wasn't here?"

"I don't know. I hadn't planned. Maybe ask Ann to meet me somewhere after my class."

"You wanted to talk to her real badly, then?"

"I didn't say that, Lieutenant."

Challice had a decision to make then. He had no information strong enough to classify either of these men as suspects. At least in the technical sense. The fact that they had dated the girl wasn't enough. Nor was the fact that neither of them had been at the Esquire Grill at the time of the murder. They might have alibis elsewhere. Maybe something else would turn up at the scene of the crime. Like a footprint, or any one of a hundred other things. Something that would be real and tangible evi-

dence. Right now, he had nothing but a feeling. Maybe he ought to be somewhere else, like back at the vacant lot supervising the routine. Joe Wint or Paul Merson could be picked up any time. But there was that feeling that told him that the answer to the murder of Ann Frantz was right in the Esquire Grill.

He took Fern Thomas aside, down to the lower end of the counter. "Did this girl have any other boyfriends besides these two?" he asked.

"She went out with a couple of other guys a time or two awhile back."

"But nobody else recently?"

"Not that I know of."

That settled it somehow. The landlady knew of no one. Ann's employer knew of only these two. And that business in the vacant lot was the work of a friend, not a passing stranger. Challice was convinced of that. It was worth a try anyhow.

He went back to the two men. "Both of you," he said, "were interested in Ann Frantz. I guess you're both interested in finding out who killed her."

They nodded cautiously.

"Not many people seem to have known her very well. You two probably knew her better than anybody. There are things about her I've got to find out. You could help me. I'd like a lit-

tle of your time. We can talk right here. And you could drop by the station and make a formal statement later. But for right now, we could make it quick and convenient for everybody. How about it?"

They both agreed. There was the veiled threat of a trip to the station, of course. But maybe they were actually interested in helping out. Or at least one of them might be.

Challice spent a dime at the pay phone telling headquarters where he'd be for the next hour or so. Then he went back to the table where Joe Wint was already sitting, and invited Paul Merson over to join them. He was being unorthodox, he knew. He should question them singly, and later he might do that. But there might be an advantage this way, too. He'd try.

"Hey, Fern," Joe Wint said. "Bring us some coffee."

They waited for the coffee, but nobody settled down and got comfortable. They unbuttoned their coats but kept them on, and just pushed their hats back on their foreheads a little. Challice tried to watch them both equally. He hadn't picked one out yet. They were both nervous and upset. Whether they realized they were suspected, he didn't know. Probably.

The coffee arrived, and Fern Thomas lingered. Challice and

Merson fooled around with the cream and sugar. Joe Wint started to drink his black. Then he made a wry face.

"This stuff's terrible," he told Fern. "How long'd you boil it anyway? Or is it left over from lunch?"

"Sorry," Fern said. "I'll make some fresh."

"Do that," Wint said as she went away. "She usually makes it on the weak side," he told Challice, and he pushed his cup aside. He was more nervous than he looked, and he was making a big issue of the coffee to cover up.

"What can we do to help, lieutenant?" Merson asked. He was tense, but the gaze of his eyes was direct.

"I'm not sure," Challice said truthfully. "But I want to find out everything I can about Ann Frantz. Her habits, her character, her background, her interests, her other friends maybe. You see, from the way it happened, it seemed like she was killed by somebody who knew her, somebody who knew she'd be going by that place at a certain time in the evening. Because she wasn't robbed or disturbed in any way. Just strangled by somebody who had that in mind and nothing else."

"That could mean one of us two," Joe Wint said.

"It could. But I'm making no

accusations. Let me tell you this, though. Anything you could do to help, anything to help us find the real killer, would take the pressure off you."

Challice let that logic sink in a little. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Fern Thomas moving back and forth behind the counter. It seemed as if she wanted to listen to the conversation at the table, but didn't know how to go about it without looking like she was butting in.

"Let me start this way," he said to the two men. "Does either of you know of any other friends Ann Frantz might have had?"

They both shook their heads, and Merson said, "She was a funny girl, lieutenant. Very quiet. Kind of shy, really. I don't think she made friends easily."

"It was just you two, then?"

"As far as I know," Merson said.

"And you two knew about each other?"

"Yes . . ."

"And how did you two find out about each other?"

Joe Wint shrugged. "I guess we ran into each other right here."

"How did you feel about each other? I mean, you both dated Miss Frantz pretty regularly. You were both pretty interested. So how did you like the idea of the other guy being in the picture, too?"

"It didn't make any difference to me," Wint answered quickly.

"How about you, Merson?"

Merson hesitated. He played with his spoon, stirred his coffee. "I was a little jealous," he said finally. "I liked Ann a lot."

"How much did you like her, Wint?" Challice asked, pressing the issue, boring in.

"I liked her, sure. I went out with her, didn't I?"

"If you liked her, why weren't you jealous?"

Now Joe Wint hesitated. "I guess I'm not the kind to get jealous," he said.

"I don't understand."

"Things were different between Ann and me than they were between Paul and her, that's all."

"Would you explain that?"

Joe Wint drummed his fingers on the table top. Challice watched the fingers. They were thick, powerful, the kind that could wrestle a big highway rig all day long.

"I don't get it," Challice repeated. "How were things different?"

Wint turned suddenly to Merson. "Shall I tell him, Paul?" he asked.

Merson looked miserable, embarrassed, half angry. But he controlled himself. "Go ahead, tell him," he answered finally.

"Okay," Wint said, and he turned back to his questioner.

"It was a funny deal, lieutenant. But Paul and I talked this thing over several times. Kind of argued about it sometimes, you might say. Paul argued anyway. He could get pretty mad about it. But it didn't make any difference to me. But once in awhile, you see, we'd both show up here together at the same time. We'd both have come here looking for Ann. A couple of times we both got here, and Ann would be busy, or she wouldn't be here yet. So Paul and I would start talking maybe, and the conversation would get around to Ann."

"Well, tell him if you're going to," Merson interrupted.

"Okay, okay." Joe Wint drank a mouthful of the coffee, made a face as though it were extremely distasteful. "Let's put it this way, lieutenant. Paul and I, we're different types. We go out with a girl, we expect different things. Paul here's the gentleman type. I'm not. You get what I mean? But the funny part is—this is the real funny part, lieutenant—when Paul and I got to talking one night here, it all comes out. Paul says Ann acts a certain way with him, and I say, you're crazy, that girl's got you fooled. It starts a big argument. We got two entirely different pictures of that girl."

Challice watched Paul Merson. The man had grown pale, and the muscles in his jaw could

be seen twitching under the tight skin. There was a small silence after Joe Wint finished.

"How about this, Merson?" Challice had to ask. Merson looked around, and his eyes had fire in them. "Sure, we had arguments," he said. "He was lying about Ann."

"You mean about her . . . character?" Challice probed gently.

"Absolutely."

"Would you describe Ann Frantz for me then, Mr. Merson?"

"She was a good girl; that's all there is to it." Merson spoke quickly, tensely. "I know. I went out with her oftener than he did. I had a couple of dozen dates with her at least. You get to know a girl after a couple of dozen dates. Oh, not everything, sure. But the important things. She never did anything bad in her life. Look, lieutenant, I wanted to marry the girl."

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Yes, I did."

"What was her answer?"

Merson hesitated, and there was a kind of hurt look in his eyes. "Ann had had a hard life," he said finally. "Tough breaks, I mean. It made her kind of cautious about jumping into something as big as marriage. But that was what she wanted. A husband and a home—and kids,

too. I know that's what she wanted. Just maybe not from me, that's all. But a girl like that doesn't play around like Joe said."

Challice was trying to sort out his reactions to all this, but he couldn't. Sometimes he had an instinct for which things were true and which were lies, but the instinct wasn't working now.

"Let's see now," he said cautiously. "You two had different ideas about the girl. And you argued about it. But did either of you ever ask the girl?"

"I wouldn't insult her," Merson said.

And Joe Wint laughed. Or it was something like a laugh. A sardonic little explosion of breath. "The argument was too much fun," he said. "So why should we have settled it by asking Ann? If we could have settled it by asking her, that is. Who knows whether she would have told us the truth anyhow? I don't think she would have. But the argument was interesting, lieutenant. Don't you think so? It made Ann kind of mysterious. That's interesting in a woman. Neither Paul or I knew what to believe about Ann. Now you don't either. Right, lieutenant?"

Challice looked at both of them for a minute. Then he said, "The easiest answer is that one of you is lying."

Joe Wint shrugged.

"There are several possibilities, as I see it," Challice went on. "You could be lying, Mr. Wint, because maybe you're just a smart-aleck and a braggart. There are lots of guys who claim to accomplish a lot more with women than they really do. You could be lying, Mr. Merson, to cover up the true situation between you and the girl. Your relationship with her could have been just like Wint's. And then again it's possible, I suppose, that you're both telling the truth. Ann Frantz could have been a different girl at different times with different men. Out for a good time with Wint, and having ideas of respectability and security with Merson. There are women like that."

Joe Wint smiled tautly. "Interesting like I said, isn't it, lieutenant?"

"I'm interested for just one reason," Challice told him. "I want to know which of the possibilities leads to murder."

Wint's smile broadened. "I thought so," he said. "You think one of us did it."

"The thought crossed my mind," Challice admitted.

But he wanted time now. Time to unravel a few things without letting these two beauties off the hook. The feeling was stronger than ever in him. This case could be wrapped up right

here in the Esquire Grill if his groping mind could just suddenly make the right connections.

"You two hang on a minute here," he said finally. "I'll be right back."

He got up from the table and spent another dime on the phone. It was silly, of course, to expect any results from the vacant lot so soon. Headquarters confirmed that there were none.

He went down the counter then and bought a pack of cigarettes from Fern Thomas. He smoked one while he watched her separate the two parts of the glass coffee-maker.

"Want a cup of fresh?" she asked him.

He said he did, and she poured a cup and pushed it across the counter toward him. Then he motioned her not to go away, so she lingered. They were out of earshot of the two men sitting at the rear table.

"What about Ann Frantz?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Morally, let's say."

Fern Thomas didn't answer right away. Challice had the opportunity to study her. She wasn't too bad looking, though her black hair was probably dyed. On the hefty side, too. A woman who could run a restaurant safely in this neighborhood. But probably not the kind

to whom a lonely girl like Ann Frantz would give her confidence.

"I couldn't say," the woman answered after a moment. "Ann never talked much."

"I get two different stories from the boyfriends," Challice told her.

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

"The truth might give us the motive for the murder."

"You mean one of those two?"

"Maybe."

She still hesitated, but it was obvious she knew something. Challice prodded a little. "It would save us both a lot of trouble, Miss Thomas, if you'd give me your information right here."

She understood all right. She leaned over the counter and talked in a throaty whisper. "As I said, Ann never talked much. But I'll bet I know what Joe Wint said about her. So she must have been his kind of girl. He wouldn't have spent his time with her if she wasn't."

"How do you know that?"

She made the admission without a qualm. "I know Joe," she said.

There was a hard glitter in her eyes. He believed her. "Then what about Merson?" he asked.

"I couldn't say about him. He's just a customer."

Challice watched her then as she poured two more cups of cof-

fee and took them over to the table. He took his own cup with him and joined Merson and Wint.

"Coffee any better?" he heard Fern Thomas ask.

"Yeah, this is more like it," Wint told her.

He waited till the woman left before he began. "Either of you guys want to change anything or add anything to what you said?" he asked them.

Apparently they didn't.

"Okay," he went on. "We're down to this. Unless the crew turns up something, you're my boys. You're my suspects because you were both involved with the dead girl. So I'm stuck with you two. Let's take you first, Mr. Wint."

"What about me?" Joe Wint asked. "Why should I want to kill Ann? I liked things the way they were."

"But maybe things weren't going to stay the way they were. Let's suppose, for instance, the girl wanted to marry you."

Wint shook his head.

"Or maybe she was breaking off with you to marry Merson."

"It wouldn't have made that much difference to me," Wint said confidently. "You'll have to guess again, lieutenant. I didn't kill her."

Challice let him go, and turned to Merson. "I think maybe you were telling the truth, Mr. Merson," he said. "About you and

Ann Frantz. But maybe you believed what Wint kept telling you about Ann. Jealousy is one of the best motives there is for murder."

Paul Merson didn't smile. His face was pale and there was perspiration on his forehead and upper lip. "I didn't kill her," he said.

Challice leaned his chair back on its rear legs and lit a cigarette. He didn't offer the cigarettes around. He wasn't feeling very friendly or polite. He was already impatient, and now anger and frustration were stirring in him. It was here. The answer was right here. He almost wished the law would let him apply the proper pressure to these characters.

But instead—because he had to—he kept the kid gloves on. "Okay," he said, "let's go about it scientifically. Let's talk about alibis. You first, Mr. Wint."

Joe Wint was ready. As if he'd been expecting this and had already sorted everything out in his mind. "I rolled into town at four thirty," he said. "I turned the rig in at our Union Street warehouse. Regal Truck Lines, you can check it. By five I was at the place I live. Mrs. Schneider, 518 Terry Avenue. I took a shower, shaved, got my car from Mrs. Schneider's garage, and I got here at twenty to six."

"Wouldn't that have been too early to pick up Ann?"

"Not if there was no business here."

"What's yours, Mr. Merson?" Challice ground out his cigarette fiercely.

"I worked till five."

"Okay, I can check that. But you arrived here about five minutes to six. Your work is only two blocks from here. What did you do in that fifty-five minutes?"

"Well, I came right over here," Merson said. "But the place was locked up. So I went home, changed my clothes, and came back."

For a second or two, Challice thought he'd heard it wrong. "What did you say?" he asked kind of stupidly. "The place was locked up? What time was that?"

"Maybe five fifteen."

And it was as simple as that. Just as he'd known all along, the answer had been here all the time. Challice got up from the table, and he didn't bother to excuse himself. He left the two men, and he walked down the aisle toward the front entrance of the Esquire Grill. There beside the door was a pair of women's galoshes.

He picked them up and looked them over carefully. They were meticulously, almost surgically clean. He held them in his hands for a moment. Then he came

back to the counter and laid them there in front of Fern Thomas.

"These have just been scrubbed clean," he told her.

She didn't answer him, but just stared at the galoshes.

"You forgot and left the coffee on while you were gone," he said. "And you washed these things when you came back. There were no customers here when you left and you thought you wouldn't be missed. But Paul Merson came by earlier than usual and found the place locked up. What was it, Miss Thomas? Jealousy of Ann Frantz because of her and Joe Wint being real close?"

Fern Thomas was a big woman, not too bad looking, even counting the dyed hair. Those were things Challice had already noticed. But now for the first time he looked at her hands. They were big and strong-look-

ing, as capable as almost any man's.

So he got the murderer of Ann Frantz. But the trouble was, it didn't stop him from thinking about that girl . . . how, if she'd been the kind Paul Merson thought she was, the murder had been a mistake—a useless, silly, sad mistake . . . how, if she'd been Joe Wint's girl, at least Fern Thomas had had a basis for what she'd done . . . or, if by chance both Wint and Merson had told the truth and Ann Frantz was getting ready to give up Wint and marry Merson, she could probably have saved her life if she'd told Fern Thomas about it.

Lieutenant Challice was a good cop, a smart cop. Maybe he could have dug, and answered those questions. But he had the killer, and a working cop doesn't have time for the academic details. Because there are people getting murdered every day.

At a Window Facing West

by Kim Antieau

“I still can’t find this place on the map,” Rich said, smoothing out the coffee-stained map across the metal tabletop. “Don’t worry about it,” Maggie said. She squinted as she looked out across the Gulf of California. A pelican followed the line of waves for a moment before diving into the turquoise water.

“I don’t like it here,” Rich said. He leaned toward Maggie and Peter and whispered, “They all seem so poor.”

Maggie took a sip of beer to keep herself from saying something cruel to Rich. They should have never suggested he come along on this trip. Because Rich could not bear to stray off the beaten path, they had spent over two weeks in tacky tourist towns. He did not trust waiters who could not speak English, and he turned pale at the sight of dirty children.

Peter glanced at Maggie. She put down her glass and squeezed lemon along the rim. She wished they had been able to find limes. Of course, she supposed, they had been lucky to find a restaurant at all. And hotel rooms. She doubted that many tourists came to this place—wherever it was.

“I wish I could do something for all those poor dirty little children,” Rich said. He glanced about uncomfortably.

Maggie sighed. Peter shook his head at her.

“Give them money if you think they’re so poor,” Maggie said. “Or throw a bucket of water over them. That should clean up a few of them.”

“Don’t be nasty,” Peter said.

Rich pushed away from the table. “It must be nice to be so fearless, Maggie.” He strode from the table and the restaurant. He stopped at the edge of the dirt road leading back to the village center and looked in either direction. A truck rumbled by and covered him with a cloud of dust.

“I hope he finds his way back to the hotel,” Peter said. “He can’t help the way he is, Maggie. The divorce has really shaken him.”

Two boys ran up to the table. One carried a bucket of dirty water; the other held a squeegee. “Windows! Windows!” they cried to-

gether. Good thing Rich was gone, Maggie thought; these kids would scare him to death. Maggie nodded to the boys, and they ran to Peter's blue van and began washing the windows.

"Your brother has always been like this," Maggie said. "My god, he is afraid of everything."

"He's led a sheltered life," Peter said. "Ann Arbor is a long way from Mexico."

Maggie shrugged and leaned back and closed her eyes. The sun felt nice on her face. The sound of water rolling across the sand was soothing. Now this was a vacation. She was going to stay here for a few days no matter what Rich thought.

The boys finished the windows and ran back to the table. Maggie glanced at the van as she pulled coins from the pocket of her jeans. Now the sides of the dusty van were streaked where water had run down from the windows. She gave the money to the boys, and they ran away.

"Rich is trying to be adventurous," Peter said. "He read *People's Guide to Mexico*." Peter grinned, and Maggie laughed.

"All right, all right," Maggie said. "I'll be nice to him."

For dinner, they sat outside the same restaurant at the same table. Inside, the restaurant was crowded and noisy. Music from the jukebox came from the open windows.

"See, Rich, Bruce Springsteen. We're not that far from civilization," Maggie said. Insects buzzed around the lantern on the table. Peter stared at the flame and smiled happily as he consumed several beers. The beach became dark, except for the restaurant lights and several bonfires in the distance. Figures danced in front of the fires, black shadows against gold light.

Rich lifted his bottle of beer in salute. "You were right and I was wrong, Maggie. I am a jerk. I can't help it. A character flaw." He laughed drunkenly. "While you were out protesting the war in college, I was doing my homework. While you were marching against chemical dumps, I was doing taxes for the dumpers. I am a spineless worthless piece of crap." He laughed again.

"I wouldn't go that far," Maggie said. She sipped her beer slowly. It appeared she would be driving them back to the hotel.

"You always fight the good fight," Rich said. "You are always politically correct; I am politically incorrect. You say terrorists, I say freedom fighters. You say freedom fighters, I say guerrillas."

"Don't get her started," Peter said, lifting his head to look away

from the lantern. "I don't want to hear any political speeches to-night. I want peace and quiet, beer and pretzels."

"Oh, shut up, both of you," Maggie said. "I'm sitting here trying to enjoy my beer and I'm being attacked on both sides. I stand up for what I believe in, so what?"

Peter waved a hand. "It's too late, Rich. You've started her. She'll talk about which charities she donates to and why, and which ones you shouldn't donate to and why. She can tell you about repressed people everywhere. She's got it all right here." He tapped his head and grinned.

"The helper of the downtrodden! Patron of Mother Earth," Rich said, "we bow down to you." Rich and Peter dropped from their chairs onto the concrete porch and bowed in front of Maggie.

She laughed. "Go away. I'm trying to have a vacation."

Giggling, they pulled themselves into their chairs again. They sat quietly for several minutes. Rich drained his beer and then finished Peter's.

"We still don't know where we are," Rich said. The light from the lantern made his eyes red.

"I know where we are," Peter said.

"Mexico is not all that stable, you know," Rich continued, as if not hearing Peter. "People disappear here, too. Americans. United Statesians. Whatever we are. We disappear, too. They want our credit cards."

Maggie laughed. Rich stared angrily at her. "It's all so funny to you."

"They can have my plastic," Maggie said. "It's not really vogue for a political correspondent to carry around such things anyway."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Rich said, covering his mouth.

"Time to go home," Peter said. He stood up and put an arm across Rich's shoulder.

"You take him," Maggie said. "I'm not finished with my beer."

"Come on, Maggie," Peter said. "I've had too much to drink. You can come back after you've dropped us off if you want."

Maggie hesitated, and then she went inside the smoky restaurant to pay the bill. The conversation died for a moment as everyone stared at her. The cash register rang, and the conversations began again. Outside, Rich vomited on the left rear tire of the van.

Maggie sat at the window of their second story hotel room while Peter helped Rich into bed in his room. Their hotel was at the

center of the village. Directly across the street, blocking the view of the ocean, was some sort of government building. Between the government building and the hotel was a statue of a man on a rearing horse at the center of a traffic circle. Some Mexican general. Maggie had read the inscription and then promptly forgotten it. Purple and yellow flowers grew at the back feet of the horse. No cars traveled around the circle now. A single light from the government building illuminated the man and the horse. The two boys who had washed the windows of the van sat on a nearby bench counting their money. Maggie wished she could still hear the ocean.

"He's almost asleep," Peter said as he came through the door. "He didn't want to stay alone. He's crying."

"What a baby."

Peter grabbed the doorknob and stared at her. "Sometimes you have absolutely no compassion."

Maggie turned from the window and sat on the bed.

"I wasn't expecting to babysit during our vacation," she said. "I wanted to relax and have fun."

"It hasn't been so terrible," he said. "He just gets afraid. He's never been alone. He was married to Jean right out of high school. He feels as though his entire life is crumbling."

"He shouldn't drink so much," Maggie said. "Though at least when he's drunk he's slightly amusing."

"Don't make fun of him," Peter said.

"I've made you angry," she said. "I'm sorry."

"And don't patronize me! He's known true fear; have you? I don't see you running down to Nicaragua and El Salvador, or Guatemala or any of those places you write about so eloquently. Perhaps you're just as frightened as all of us and you won't admit it. You don't really care about anything, do you? You just stay on the sidelines and write about it and pretend you're fighting the good fight." Peter pulled open the door again. "I'm staying with Rich until he feels better."

"That could be for the rest of his life," Maggie said. She sighed. "I want to explore the beach first thing tomorrow morning."

"Rich wants to leave this place," Peter said.

Maggie chewed her cheek. "Why am I being made out to be the bad guy here? I want a few days of relaxation before I go back to work. I think I've really been very accommodating to your brother."

"Good night, Maggie." Peter left, shutting the door behind him.

Maggie took off her clothes, put on a nightgown, and turned off

the light. She slid under the covers. They were staying; she didn't care how Rich felt.

Maggie opened her eyes. For a moment she did not know where she was. The dark room had an unfamiliar smell—kerosene? Peter was not asleep next to her. Someone screamed.

Maggie threw off her covers and ran to the window. Below, at the center of the traffic circle, a woman struggled to get away from two men dressed in uniforms with batons and pistols strapped to their legs. Each held an arm of the woman. They spoke loudly but too rapidly for Maggie to understand. Black hair covered the woman's face as she screamed. She pulled at her hair, and her cries became desperate whimpers.

"Help me," she cried.

Maggie stepped back from the window. Had she heard those words in English or Spanish? She leaned forward slightly. The woman kicked one of the men. He pulled out his baton. He was going to hit her. Maggie covered her mouth; she felt ill. The man dropped the baton. The woman screamed again.

Maggie's heart raced. They would kill the woman if someone did not stop them. The woman had screamed for help and no one had answered. Everyone hid behind closed doors. Everyone.

Maggie had to do something, but she felt frozen in place. The woman went limp, becoming a dead weight in the men's arms. They dragged her past the rearing horse. The woman screamed again, long and loud, a pathetic wail. "Help me," she sobbed. They pulled her toward the government building and out of view of the hotel window. The sound of her cries died, and the night was quiet again. A dog barked in the distance. A seagull mewed.

Maggie stared out the window. She had watched two armed men drag someone away, and she had done nothing to stop them. The helper of the downtrodden. Patron of Mother Earth.

She had watched passively.

She backed away until the edge of the bed touched her thighs. She sat on the bed. Her legs and hands trembled.

What if they came after her next? Or Peter? She listened closely. No unusual sounds. Perhaps Rich had been right all along. Perhaps they were not safe here.

Noiselessly, Maggie packed their clothes. Then she sat on the bed and waited for sunrise.

* * *

Peter kissed her cheek, and she opened her eyes. Bright sunshine came through the open window. A warm breeze brought in the smells of the ocean.

"Sorry about last night," Peter said.

Maggie sat up. She was still nauseated.

"Did you hear anything last night?" Maggie asked.

Peter shook his head. "Not a thing. Rich's ready to explore the beach with us this morning. He's even hungry after all that drinking." Peter smiled. "Come to think of it, Rich said he thought he heard something in the night. A scream, maybe. You could ask him. Why?"

Maggie walked slowly to the window until she could just see the place where the woman and men had struggled. The scene flashed before her. She closed her eyes. What if someone had seen her watching, doing nothing? They could report her, arrest her. She breathed deeply. This was all stupid. She was in a foreign country, what could she have done?

"I thought I saw something last night, that's all," Maggie said.

"You've packed." Peter put his hands on Maggie's shoulders. "What's wrong? You look scared to death."

"I had a bad night," she snapped. She shook off his hands. "What did you expect with you in the other room while I was alone in this macho country?"

"You've never been afraid to be alone before."

"I wasn't afraid! Can we drop this?" Was the woman across the street now in that building being tortured? Maggie should go to the police and report what she saw. She should do something before it was too late.

She shivered. "I want to leave," Maggie said. "I want to go home."

Maggie lay across the back seat while Peter drove. Rich sat next to him looking out the window.

"I hope you're not leaving because of me," Rich said quietly.

"It's time to go home, that's all," Peter answered.

Maggie closed her eyes. She did not want to hear them. Peter the peacemaker. Rich the whiner. She wanted to curl up into a little ball and cry. She could have helped that woman last night, but she hadn't. She knew the woman had been destroyed. Killed, tortured, driven insane, something. All because Maggie had stood there and watched and done absolutely nothing.

She awakened in a sweat, the woman's screams echoing inside

her head. She sat up. There was still something she could do to help. She could go back and tell someone what she had seen.

The idea terrified her. "Are we almost to the border?" Maggie asked.

"Soon, Maggie, soon," Peter answered.

Maggie was relieved to be in their familiar apartment again. The pictures on the walls, the carpeting, the television set, the view of the city. She ran her fingers across the kitchen table. She did not even mind that Rich had to stay a few days because his plane was not scheduled to leave until the end of the week.

"I'll make dinner," Rich said, sounding more certain of himself again. "What would you like, Maggie?"

"Sleep," she said. She smiled wearily. "I'm tired. You two stay up and have fun."

Peter turned on the television. Time for the news. Maggie quickly went into the bedroom and closed the door. She rubbed her stomach and went to the bathroom and splashed her face with cold water.

"It's not important," Maggie said as she looked at her reflection. "Whatever happened, happened; end of story." She had never seen fear in her own eyes before. It looked unnatural.

She stripped off her clothes and crawled, naked, under the covers. It would all be better after she slept.

She was in her own bed, but the window looked down upon the statue of the horse and its general. Beneath the statue, the woman lay. The horse shook itself alive and pummeled the prone woman with its hooves. Maggie backed away from the window.

"Maggie, Maggie." Peter's voice was close to her ear. "You were crying out in your sleep. Are you all right?"

Maggie opened her eyes. The room came into focus. She put her arms around Peter and held him tightly.

"Are you ever afraid?" she asked.

He laughed.

"I'm serious," she said, pulling away from him.

"Of course I'm afraid," he said. "Everyone's afraid. It's normal. That's what life is all about. What's wrong with you? You've been acting strange ever since we left Mexico. You hardly said anything in the car."

"I've never been afraid before," Maggie said. "Rich was right. I was fearless."

"Ignorant," Peter said. "You just never really looked at the

world." He smoothed a strand of hair off her face. "Dinner's ready." He got up from the bed and left the room.

After a few minutes, Maggie got dressed and followed him out.

She was certain Rich knew what she had done by the way he watched her. He had heard the screams, too, even though he denied it when she asked him. He had done nothing, too. That was part of his character. It was not supposed to be part of hers. She was the fighter. The believer.

Easy to march in protests with all of those people around you, someone had told her once. Easy to believe in peace when no one holds a gun to your head. Who said that? Maggie stared at Rich across the dinner table. He had said it, hadn't he? During one of his drunken lectures in Mexico. Easy to believe when you are not afraid.

Maggie listened to the sounds of Rich and Peter eating, to the refrigerator sighing, to the traffic in the distance. Was the woman still screaming?

She did not want to sleep. She knew she would hear the screams again. She sat in her study at the typewriter. Maybe she could write about what happened to the woman. Make it part of her column. That would vindicate her. The world would know what had happened.

Maggie shook her head and turned off the typewriter. No, she knew nothing about the woman. All she could write about was her own fear and fall from grace.

She went into the darkened living room and curled up on the couch. She switched on the light and sat with her back to the curtained window. She did not want to hear or see anything as she flipped through the pages of *Vegetarian Times*.

Rich and Peter went to Disneyland the following day. Maggie kept the curtains closed and watched soap operas. She scanned the *Los Angeles Times* for any information about a missing woman in Mexico. She found nothing.

She dozed once in the afternoon and woke herself up quickly before the woman could find her. That night, she drank coffee and read magazines at the kitchen table while Peter and Rich slept.

"Maggie, it's four in the morning," Peter said. "Why are you still up? You haven't slept in days." He rubbed his eyes and pulled out a chair and sat next to her.

"I can't," Maggie said.

"Why?"

Maggie bit her lip. Tears streamed down her face.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"Of what?" Peter asked.

"I can't tell you," she said. "You'd hate me. You'd think I was a coward."

He shook his head. "No, I wouldn't. I don't know what's wrong with you, but you've got to stop this. You don't look or sound good. So you're afraid. Don't you know that everyone is afraid? That's what life is, Maggie. Living is going on despite the fear. Rich does that every day. He's terrified, but most of the time he just faces his fears and carries on."

"But I think I may have . . ." She stopped. She could not tell him. She could not explain what she had done because she did not understand it. She had let them take away the woman and she had done nothing to stop them. "Shhh," she said to Peter. "Do you hear that?"

Peter listened silently. "No, I don't hear anything," he finally said.

Maggie started to cry again. "I still hear her screaming."

Maggie waited until Peter and Rich left the apartment for the airport. Then she packed a bag and got into the car and began the drive to Mexico. Peter was right. People had to face their fears. She had to find out what had happened to the woman. Then maybe the screaming would stop.

She drove into the night. She stopped once for coffee. She heard the sounds of the woman's screams, and she quickly returned to the car and started driving again. She cried as she traveled through Mexico; Rich said it was not safe at night. She took a wrong turn and had to double back. Then she was at the village. She stopped the car in front of the police station.

She climbed out of the car. The night was quiet. The air was damp and fishy smelling. She heard the waves stroking the sand. No one screamed.

She walked into the police station. It was a small room. Two officers sat behind desks, their feet up, talking and laughing together. They both stood when she came into the room. Her legs trembled. Her vision blurred. I have to sleep, she thought; I have to eat.

"How may we help you?" one of the men asked, speaking English. She stared at them. They were the men who had taken away the woman. She put out a hand to steady herself. It was the middle of the night and she was alone with the two men who had killed the woman.

Someone screamed. Maggie looked out toward the traffic circle. It was empty.

"May we help you?" the man repeated. A baton and gun were strapped to his leg.

"I—I saw a woman here, three or four days ago," Maggie said. She slowly backed out of the office. "In the middle of the night. You took her away."

The men looked at each other, puzzled. "I am sorry but you must be mistaken," the man said. "We have no woman. Was she a friend of yours?"

The woman screamed again. Maggie put her hands over her ears. This had to stop. She stumbled out of the office.

"You look tired. Are you well?" The officer followed her into the street.

Maggie looked over at the statue. Were the horse's hooves moving? Was there blood staining the metal? I should have helped her, Maggie thought. I could have saved her. Evil flourishes where good people do nothing. Who said that? Maggie ran toward the statue. Edmund Burke? William Shakespeare? The woman screaming in her ear?

The screams were shrill, heartbreaking. Maggie shook her head as she raced toward the statue. She had to get the cries out of her brain. She had to find the woman and save her.

She stood near the horse. The world spun. The horse moved. She opened her mouth and screamed. The police officers were beside her, trying to calm her. "It's all right," they both said in Spanish. "You will be fine." Each of them took an arm. "We will take you to the hospital. You will be fine."

Maggie screamed. Fear overwhelmed her. How could she have lived her entire life without seeing—without realizing how terrifying everything was? "Help me!" she cried. She kicked the police officer. He pulled out his baton and then dropped it. The horse's bloody hooves beat the air. The woman still screamed. Maggie pulled at her hair.

"Help me!" she screamed one more time before the officers dragged her away, out of sight of the hotel window where a woman sat watching.

JOSEPHINE BELL

1897-1987

What follows may be the last story Josephine Bell wrote. In her long life she made a major contribution to the mystery genre, both in the number of her novels and stories and in her role as co-founder of the Crime Writers Association, the equivalent in England of our own organization, the Mystery Writers of America.

*"Josephine Bell," in real life, was Doris Bell Collier Ball. She was a doctor and the daughter of a doctor, was married to a doctor, the mother of a doctor, and mother-in-law to two more. Naturally, therefore, many of her books had to do with the medical profession, beginning with *Murder in Hospital* (1937). For the first twenty years, her frequent series character was Dr. David Wintringham, often accompanied by another character from that first book, Inspector Steven Mitchell of Scotland Yard.*

*But Wintringham or Mitchell or both appear in fewer than half of her forty-five crime novels. "Since characters impressive in their variety, vitality, and realistic naturalism are one of Bell's accomplishments, it is perhaps not unexpected that her works fail to utilize a central series figure," says Nancy Ellen Talburt in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* (2nd ed.). She did not limit herself to the medical world, and a number of her novels draw on other fields as well—music, the theater, and amateur archaeology, for instance. Both theater and the team of Wintringham and Mitchell figure in *Curtain Call for a Corpse* (in England titled *Murder at Half-Term*, 1939), published here in 1965. Her first introduction to readers on this side of the Atlantic had come ten years earlier with *Bones in the Barrow*.*

*In addition to mystery novels, she wrote mystery short stories; a number of mainstream novels, and a nonfiction work, *Crime in Our Time* (1961).*

Miss Chandler's Mistake

by Josephine Bell

Margery Chandler stood up when the others stood up and waited quietly in the background for the spate of conversation and comment to work itself out and for someone to notice her continued presence there. But the relatives and beneficiaries of the late Mrs. Stevens were too much roused by the reading of the will to turn their attention from its interesting contents to the person of the deceased's companion. They had taken Miss Chandler for granted throughout her ten years of devoted service to the old lady who had just enriched them by her departing. On their infrequent visits to Mrs. Stevens they had always tried to show the companion the same politeness and limited attention that they would give to any other of their acquaintance, and they were quite prepared to do the same now. Only for the moment they had forgotten her, because each had received—certainly not a fortune but considerably more than they had dared to hope. They were all seven of them a little overexcited, a little tremulous at finding that their aunt, or great-aunt (for Mrs. Stevens had no direct descendants living), had cut up so surprisingly well. They laughed; they wiped their eyes, they patted one another and linked arms, and all the time they exploded into fragments of speech.

“Jessie, I am so glad for your rake! It will make all the difference to Peter's education, won't it?”

“I must say I never imagined—”

“Cecil, I thought she had put it all in an annuity—”

“No, dear. That was Aunt Jane.”

“Oh, that awful tea service! Yes, I remember.”

In the end it was the family solicitor who recalled his clients to their duty.

“I think,” he murmured to the eldest male relative, “that Miss Chandler will be wanting to leave. I—er—it will take some time before we get probate. The small legacy—I wondered if it would meet with your wishes for me to give it to her now. Her circumstances—”

The eldest relative looked vague, but his wife, who had been

listening, answered for him. "I agree, certainly. I'm sure the others will, too."

She spoke to one or two of them in a low voice; they nodded their heads in assent. "Miss Chandler," she went on, turning to the companion and raising her voice, "it has been suggested that perhaps you might like to receive your legacy before you leave us for good this afternoon. We are all extremely grateful to you for your excellent care and companionship of my aunt during the latter part of her life, and we should like to show that gratitude in any way we can. It might be a convenience to you while waiting for another post—or perhaps you have already got one—"

"No," said Miss Chandler, quietly coming forward, "I have not got one yet."

"Then I expect you would like—we would like—Mr. Hall is quite prepared to advance—because after all the amount is—is—"

"Is very small," said Miss Chandler gently.

The relatives looked profoundly shocked, but they could not dispute the truth of this statement. The one called Jessie said in a flustered way,

"Aunt left her Bible as well to Miss Chandler. I'm sure I don't know where Aunt's Bible is. Shall I ring the bell? Would the maid—?"

"I will fetch it," answered Miss Chandler. "I know where it is. After all," she added with a little smile, "I have read out of it every night for ten years."

An uncomfortable silence followed her exit from the room. One relative said petulantly, "Did she expect to cut us all out of the will? After all, ten pounds is ten pounds."

"And the Bible, too. That is a sign of Aunt's affection," Cecil's wife said. "She ought to consider herself lucky to get anything. Doesn't she realize Aunt bought herself an annuity?"

"No, dear, that was Aunt Jane."

"What? Oh yes, how stupid of me. You said so before."

Miss Chandler came back carrying the late Mrs. Stevens' Bible and a small suitcase. She had put on her hat and coat and was ready to leave. Mr. Hall, the solicitor, took a wad of notes from his breast pocket and handed them to her.

"I have brought notes," he said, "instead of a check. I thought you might prefer it."

"Yes," she answered, "I have no banking account."

She took the notes and began to put them away in her bag.

"Better count them," suggested Cecil.

She took them out again obediently, and did so twice.

"You have given me a note too much. The will said ten pounds."

"Guineas," said Mr. Hall firmly.

"I thought it was pounds," said Cecil's wife.

"Yes, pounds," agreed Jessie.

"It was guineas," repeated Mr. Hall, pressing the note back into Miss Chandler's hand. "I am quite certain that I am right—so sure of it, indeed, that I am prepared to back my mistake personally, if it is one. That should convince everyone present that I am not in error."

Miss Chandler knew that he would be as good as his word; she also knew that the amount of her legacy was ten pounds. She gave Mr. Hall a grateful smile as she handed back the receipt, thanked him, and shook his proffered hand. The relatives copied his example and also shook hands with her. Cecil went with her to the door of the room.

"Please don't come any farther," she said. "I will see myself out the front door."

"Your luggage?"

"Carter Patterson took my trunk yesterday. I am going to my married sister at first. I have only this suitcase. Thank you. Good-bye."

As she crossed the hall, she heard the murmur of their voices rise again. They had recovered from their temporary embarrassment.

She stood on the steps of the house where she had lived for ten years. She had been twenty-four when she first came there. A taxi cruised slowly past. The driver slowed down at sight of her suitcase, but she shook her head. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously at the meanness of women and drove on. Miss Chandler clutched her bag, took a firmer hold of the suitcase, and walked away up the street.

Margery Chandler stayed with her sister at her small, neat, new-estate home for several weeks. She answered countless advertisements, but all to no purpose. It seemed as if lady companions, no longer quite young, were a glut on the market. She knew that her sister resented her prolonged visit, and found her boring because she would not go upon shopping expeditions where she could not afford to buy anything, or to cinemas

which she considered an unwarranted luxury. Her last month's wages gradually disappeared for board and necessary expenses. She looked in her purse and counted the poor legacy Mrs. Stevens had left her. It had already been diminished by the price of a new pair of shoes. With a sign of despair, she returned to the advertisement lists and worked slowly through them. There seemed to be nothing remotely suitable. Then she paused.

"It's in here again, Florrie."

"That advert, do you mean?"

"Yes, the one we've always turned down. That's three weeks running it's been here, at least."

"Looks as if they found it a job to get someone. What's wrong with it from your point of view?"

"It says nurse-companion. I'm not qualified."

Florence Sims leaned over her sister's shoulder. She was several years younger than Margery, and as positive and self-assured as the latter was diffident. Though, after the death of their mother, Margery had looked after her younger sister singlehanded, and singlehanded six years later had seen her father through his last illness, she felt acutely her lack in training in any technique, however humble. When Florence protested her belief in her sister's experience, acquired through sixteen years of housekeeping and companionship with young and old, chronic invalid and dying parent, Margery frowned in anxious disagreement, but she bent once more over the newspaper and read the familiar lines.

"*Nurse-Companion*. Wanted immediately. Take full charge elderly lady—bed-ridden—invalid. Experience essential. Terms by arrangement. Apply Hughes and Purvis, Solicitors. Gray's Inn Rd. W.C.2."

Florence pointed with her finger. "It says immediately. Did you notice that? It wasn't in before. It's my belief they can't get anyone to take it on. You could probably make a good thing of it. 'Terms by arrangement.' You could stick out for a decent screw for once. Why don't you have a shot at it? It wouldn't hurt you to find out a little more about it, would it?"

"I don't know how I could call myself a nurse."

"Oh, very well. But don't say I didn't advise you. Of course, you're welcome to stay here for the rest of your life if you want to."

It being so painfully obvious from the vigorous way in which Florence was dusting the mantelpiece that her welcome had already outlived itself, Margery's eyes filled with tears and she gazed

miserably at the advertisement, which had become a dismal blur before her eyes.

"I think perhaps I will write and ask for more detail," she said in a small voice.

"Why not ring up for an appointment? It'd be worth half a dozen letters."

"All right. I might as well."

"I'll get the number for you if you like."

Florence hurried out into the hall. Margery sat on, thinking of her youth spent in hard unrewarding work and of her future, uncertain and bleak. Her sister came bouncing back to her.

"I've fixed it for you. Two thirty this afternoon." She saw the misery in Margery's face and felt ashamed of herself.

"It isn't that I don't want you here. Honest, it isn't. It's Bob, really. It bothers him, having visitors for long. But don't let that influence you. If you don't like the look of the job when you see it, turn it down. We'll find something else."

Margery patted the hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Florrie. Perhaps it'll be just the job I want. Anyway, I'd like to be working again. I'm not used to being idle."

Florence gave her sister's shoulder a final pat and went away singing cheerfully. Margery laid her sad face down on her arms and wept.

John Hughes, senior partner of Hughes and Purvis, sat at his desk near the window of his room.

The offices of the firm of Hughes and Purvis, solicitors, were on the first floor of a large building in the Gray's Inn Road, an old-fashioned building made of grimy stone with tall, deep-set windows and a narrow pillared porch sheltering a flight of steep steps. Swing doors with glass upper halves clapped perpetually at the top of these steps, while a public telephone box just inside them proclaimed a desire to keep up with the times and to serve the convenience of clients hampered by the gloom and obscurity of the place.

The firm's business consisted of problems arising out of insurance of all kinds, and it was with one such matter that Mr. Hughes was struggling when his partner, Fred Purvis, came in carrying some papers.

"If you have anything to tell me more important than the Ferris

car crash, you can do so; otherwise, for God's sake don't interrupt me," said Hughes, not looking up.

"Well, I have. Another Standish claim."

Purvis threw down a wad of letters clipped together at one corner. Hughes glanced through them rapidly, making swift comment as he did so.

"Godfrey Standish . . . he crops up everywhere, doesn't he? How does he know about these things so quickly? This burglary took place on the tenth in the small hours of the morning. Standish's letter embodying the claim was sent to the insurance company on the tenth. It reached them in the afternoon of the same day. That burglary could not have been in the morning papers on the tenth. It would be in the evening ones, perhaps. But the lady who had her furs stolen was nobody in particular. Was it in the papers at all?"

"We can find out," answered Purvis, making a note of it.

"Now, look at this claim. Some of the furs must have been older than others; but these without exception are the prices of new ones. The man's methods are distressingly monotonous and persistent.

"So is the company. But they score off him this time. Look. Silver Fox cape two hundred fifty guineas. Sable tie one hundred twenty-five pounds. He has overreached himself there. Mrs. Panton may be ignorant or may have been misinformed. As she has lost her fur, we'll give her the benefit of the doubt. But in sober fact her husband, when he insured the furs, deliberately refused to insure these two items. Turn over—you'll see! There!"

Hughes read the letter from the insurance company, and a broad and satisfied grin spread over his face.

"They 'tried to persuade him to insure the valuable pieces with the rest,' " he quoted, "but 'Mr. Panton said these particular furs were so carefully looked after that it was unnecessary to insure them, and though it was pointed out to him that the difference in the premium was negligible, he still refused to consider covering them!' "

Hughes slapped the letter with his hand and laughed heartily.

"So we are to break the sad news to Mr. Standish that his principal claim falls flat. This is the happiest moment of the last fortnight. But there are still two things I want to know. First, Mrs. Panton knew or did not know the terms of the insurance, and second, how did Standish get onto this burglary as quickly as he did?"

"I could ring the lady up and find out the answer to the first of those questions."

Purvis called a number and asked his question. As he put down the receiver he said, "As I thought. The lady assures me all the furs are insured. Her husband is abroad, that is why they are employing an agent to make her claim for her."

Hughes did not answer. He was looking at a photograph on his table. Without turning he said quietly, "Do you generally omit to knock before you come into the room, Cope?"

Purvis swung round and saw one of the clerks standing just inside the door. The man was startled and stammered as he answered, "I did knock, sir."

"Then knock louder next time," answered Hughes, "and wait till you hear me answer. What is it?"

"A Miss Chandler, sir. She rang up for an appointment. To answer an advert, she said."

"Miss—? Yes, I know. I shall be ready for her in five minutes. Wait! You can take a letter to Miss Gregory. I want it to go at once."

He scribbled busily for a few seconds and handed the sheet of paper folded in half to the waiting clerk, who took it and disappeared through the door.

"I've been wondering about that young man," said Hughes thoughtfully. "He's been here a year. He's quite efficient, quiet, and polite. And he came in just now on purpose to hear us talking."

Purvis nodded. "Idle curiosity or—what?"

"I don't know." Hughes drummed on the desk with his fingers. "I may be fanciful, but I think our friend Standish resents us. We know that our friend Standish is very quick in his movements, very much on the spot. He must have means of communication and information; it would be impossible otherwise."

"You think that young Cope is one of them?"

"I don't know, I tell you. But if he is, we may gather how he works. He cannot fail to be interested in that letter I have just sent out for Miss Gregory to type. It informs the lady with the furs (or rather, without them) that her husband did not insure them all. You might keep an eye on Cope, Purvis. Take him with you next time you have a job outside. Give him a drink and get him to talk."

Next door in the clerks' office Cope carried the folded paper to Miss Gregory and spread it out before her.

"They want it typed and sent off at once," he said, bending over it to flatten it out better.

"Who's they?"

"Mr. Hughes and Mr. Purvis."

"What? Both of them? It must be important. Here, take your face away. Who's going to type this, you or me? Think I can see through the back of your head?"

Cope scowled at her but moved away. As he did so, Miss Chandler, who was waiting at the far end of the room, half-rose from her chair. The clerk went up to her.

"Mr. Hughes will be free in about five minutes' time," he said, and went back to his own table. He sat thinking for a minute, glancing from time to time at Miss Gregory. But she had already finished the letter and, drawing it from the typewriter, went with it to the door of Mr. Hughes's room, knocked, and was admitted by Mr. Purvis, who came out and disappeared through another door into his own room. Miss Chandler half-rose again as he appeared but seeing no response on his face sank down again.

A moment later Miss Gregory came out and, standing in the doorway, beckoned with the hand that held the now signed letter.

"Will you come this way, please," she said briskly.

Margery Chandler clutched her gloves and bag, nervously adjusted her cheap fur, and walked forward with a sinking heart.

The door closed behind her. She saw a thick-set man in a grey suit sitting at an office desk. His broad face lifted as she went in, and a pair of unusually intelligent eyes darted sharply over her face and figure. The nervousness she had felt sitting in the outer room among the clerks was doubled by this keen inspection of her person; she knew that her face was screwing itself up most unbecomingly, but she could not help it, nor stop the trembling of her hands. The man at the desk looked disappointed and disgusted. He picked up a letter lying before him.

"You are Miss Chandler?"

"Yes."

"Sit down, please."

She obeyed, sitting on the edge of a chair exactly opposite to his on the other side of the desk.

"You have applied for the post of nurse-companion, as advertised by me. Are you a nurse?"

"N-No—not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not a qualified nurse."

"Do you mean that you broke your training, or that you couldn't pass the exams?"

"I—I haven't had any real training—I mean—no hospital training—"

"None at all?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean by wasting my time?"

"I have had some years of experience—I thought—of course, I don't know what type of case— But I thought—I might—after so long—"

"How many years of experience have you had?"

"Altogether, do you mean, counting Mother and Father?"

Mr. Hughes sank deeper into his chair and glared at her. Miss Chandler hurried on:

"I was with Mrs. Stevens for ten years, but for the first six she was quite all right, only irritable sometimes and very faddy about her food. But I put up with all that because after Father died—"

"Did you nurse your father in his last illness?"

"Yes. Of course, it was not like Mother's illness. That was six years before, but Father was never quite the same after Mother died."

"Did you nurse your mother, too?"

"Oh yes. For six months. It was a cancer. She didn't take it in time, the doctor said. Father was only ill a fortnight—pneumonia on top of flu."

"But this Mrs.—Stevens. You say she was well for six years, more or less. After that she was ill?"

"Yes. She had a stroke."

"Ah." Mr. Hughes looked gratified. "Was she badly disabled?"

"Yes, at first. Afterwards she recovered the use of her limbs except for a little weakness in one arm and leg. It made her nervous getting about; she liked to have me handy all the time."

"I see." Mr. Hughes looked at her speculatively. In talking of Mrs. Stevens her nervousness had disappeared and her face looked animated and almost pretty. Now that his eye was on her again, she relapsed into her former state of panic.

"Well," Mr. Hughes said, stabbing at the blotting paper with his pencil, "I don't think you had the slightest justification for answering that advertisement, but since you are here I will tell you



IN TALKING OF MRS. STEVENS HER NERVOUSNESS HAD DISAPPEARED AND HER FACE LOOKED ANIMATED AND ALMOST PRETTY. NOW THAT HIS EYE WAS ON HER AGAIN, SHE RELAPSED INTO HER FORMER STATE OF PANIC.

about the post. It is another case of apoplexy but much more severe. In this lady the stroke has caused almost complete paralysis; she can move her hands a little, her legs not at all. Besides this, her speech has been so badly affected that she cannot really talk at all. She makes sounds, but not intelligible ones. At present she is in a hospital, but she is very unhappy there. She has no relations. I propose moving her to a small flat where she would be in charge of a companion capable of nursing her. I would provide a half-time daily maid to do the housework and cooking in the morning. The companion could go out if necessary in the morning, and I would arrange one afternoon a week free. If you had not already nursed a similar but milder case, I would not be prepared to consider your application, since you are not trained."

"You haven't found it easy to get anyone, either, have you?" said Miss Chandler.

Mr. Hughes looked up sharply.

"I mean, the advertisement has been in a good many times, hasn't it? So the trained nurses haven't been very eager to take it up, and I'm not surprised."

"Oh," said Mr. Hughes. The corners of his mouth twitched a little. "You've been studying the advertisements for some time yourself, have you? Not been so easy to get a job, eh?"

Margery Chandler looked dashed, then she smiled ruefully. "The case and I seem to be just about suited," she said.

Mr. Hughes's face softened for a moment, then he frowned. At last he made up his mind.

"I'll take you along to the hospital," he said. "You can see her. If you feel you can tackle it, and she doesn't take a violent dislike to you, I'll give you a trial. I must just speak a word to my partner. I will meet you at the front door downstairs if you will go ahead."

He held open the door of his room, and Miss Chandler went out feeling bewildered but excited. She made her way downstairs and, as she reached the hall, noticed the telephone box standing there. She thought she would telephone her sister to explain how matters stood, and felt in her purse for two pennies. Then she remembered that she did not know her sister's present telephone number. There was a man using the telephone; he had his back to her, but Miss Chandler recognized one of the clerks belonging to Hughes and Purvis, the one who had told her Mr. Hughes would soon be free. She crept up to the box so as not to disturb him and drew towards her the telephone directory on its string. Alas, it was only the half

from A to L. The other was caught inside the door. After a moment's hesitation, she gently pulled open the door and caught hold of the volume she needed. She heard the clerk's voice saying in low urgent tones, "Hughes has written—"; then he noticed her, whipped round, and pulled the door shut. Miss Chandler, who had managed to avoid by a little having her fingers pinched, began to look up Florrie's number. She would have been astonished if she had heard the clerk's next words, spoken almost in a whisper:

"Are you still there? Sorry, I was interrupted. Can you hear me? I've got to speak low. There's a woman outside—opened the door of the box a second ago. She's just been interviewing Hughes—yes—I don't know. I have an idea she's waiting on purpose. I think he's up to some new game. See you this evening. Right, I will."

He left the box with a polite nod to Miss Chandler, who went in to telephone to her sister and tell her that there was some hope of getting the job. A few seconds after she had finished her call, Mr. Hughes came downstairs.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said curtly and crossed the hall with long strides. Miss Chandler shot forward to catch him up. He held the swing door open after him, but without looking back, so that Miss Chandler, reaching it just too late before he let it go, was nearly knocked down by the force of the rebound. She struggled bravely through, however, and ran out into the street where Mr. Hughes was already hailing a taxi.

Rather breathless, Miss Chandler sank back into her corner and pulled her hat more firmly on her head.

"Sorry to rush you," said Mr. Hughes accusingly. "Trying to make up for lost time. Had to keep you waiting."

"I didn't notice it," said Miss Chandler, again overcome with nervousness. "I was telephoning to my sister not to expect me home. I mean—to expect me when she saw me. I had just finished when you came down."

"You must have had a lot to say to her," remarked Mr. Hughes, "if you took all that time on the phone."

"Oh no. You see, I couldn't start at once, because of the man—because of your clerk being there already."

Mr. Hughes turned to her with real interest.

"How did you know it was one of my clerks?"

"Because he told me when you would be ready to see me—in the office—before."

"I see." Mr. Hughes's eyes were gleaming.

"Besides," Miss Chandler went on, "when I opened the door of the telephone box to get out the directory which was caught inside, he mentioned your name. He said—"

"Go on," ordered Mr. Hughes eagerly.

"He said, 'Hughes has written,' and then I had got the book unstuck so of course I shut the door at once because I wouldn't willingly listen to anyone's private con—"

"You're a complete fool!" said Mr. Hughes rudely and glared straight before him.

Miss Chandler was shocked and horrified. She had thoughts of tapping on the window and asking the driver to put her down, but before she could make up her mind the taxi stopped and Mr. Hughes jumped out. Very reluctantly she followed.

In the hall of the hospital Mr. Hughes produced his card and spoke to the girl at the enquiry office. Soon after, her head appeared at the window.

"Sister says will you go up to the ward," she said. "Do you know your way?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mr. Hughes and strode off.

Miss Chandler toiled after him up several flights of stairs until they stopped at the ward door. A nurse came forward and led them to a bed surrounded by screens. They went inside, and Miss Chandler saw a little old woman, her face drawn down on one side, lying helplessly on her back. Her eyes brightened as she saw Mr. Hughes and her lips moved feebly, but no words came. He patted the hand that lay stiffly on the bedcover.

"I've brought Miss Chandler to see you," he said. "She is very good at nursing and she wants to look after you. Do you think you feel well enough to go to that flat I've got for you?"

The old woman put out her right hand with a jerky movement and touched Margery Chandler's arm. The ward sister came round the screen and looked at her too. Mr. Hughes watched the three women.

Sister turned to him and said quietly, "She's just longing to get away and get settled quietly by herself. I have to keep the screens round because it upsets her to see the others talking and moving about. But of course then she feels boxed in."

"Miss Chandler is proposing to look after her," said Mr. Hughes. "I have got the flat all ready."

"Then the sooner she's moved the better," said Sister. "The doctor

says she will stay like this indefinitely provided no complications set in. Personally, I think if she goes on fretting as she is now she'll do herself real harm."

A nurse came up to the screens and Sister went away. Miss Chandler looked from the patient to Mr. Hughes.

"I will look after her if she will have me," she said simply.

Again the old woman's hand came out tremblingly and rested on Margery's sleeve.

"She seems to think you'll do," said Mr. Hughes. He bent over the bed and spoke slowly and carefully. "Would you like Miss Chandler to look after you, Nanny?"

"Nanny!" repeated Margery Chandler. So it was his old nurse he was providing with a flat and a companion and daily help. It was his old nurse, who had no relations living and was miserable at the hospital away from her own cherished possessions. She looked down at his broad back and her eyes softened.

"She'll have you," said Mr. Hughes, straightening up. "I shall have to get back to the office, but if you will come back with me, we can settle details on the way."

Miss Chandler stopped and took the old woman's hand in her own.

"I will do my best—Nanny," she said gently.

About an hour later Mr. Hughes walked into the back offices of the Salvo Fire and Accident Insurance Company. He passed down the strip of marble paving beside which, screened by glass, innumerable clerks sat in rows writing, typing, sorting, filing, passing baskets of papers to and fro, occasionally getting up to walk along the lines and ask advice from superior beings who sat isolated in special glass cages of their own. Soon he reached his goal, the room of the manager director himself, and was joined by a clerk who led him in.

Mr. Hughes walked across the thick carpet and shook hands with the grey-haired man at the desk. "Well, Hughes," said the latter, "I realize it must be some news of importance to bring you down here in person. Let's have it."

Hughes wasted no time but told briefly of his recent encounters with the self-styled claims assessor Godfrey Standish, and of his suspicion of his recently acquired clerk, Cope. He described the results of Miss Chandler's unintentional eavesdropping at the telephone. Merriman whistled softly.

"You gave him the rough draft of your letter to us to take out to your typist?"

"Yes."

"So he could have read it on the way."

"If he was quick, yes."

"What do you propose to do?"

Hughes leaned forward.

"Listen. This fellow Standish is getting more and more preposterous in his claims. You have careful investigations made, and I am able to protect you pretty frequently when it comes to points of law. But the smaller companies are not so well looked after. In which case it is sheer fraud if his claims go through, as I've no doubt they do. Now it is obvious my man Cope is getting a rakeoff for news supplied. We know too that Standish has sources of information that keep him posted on fires, burglaries, and so on. He must have to get on the spot the way he does. But we haven't got a thing we can pin on to him direct. If we go to the police at this stage, they will probably pooh-pooh the whole thing. If not, Standish will undoubtedly pull in his horns and sit tight till the investigation blows over. No—we must do our own investigation."

"How?"

"Use one of your clerks. A young man in a junior position for preference, but one you feel sure of as far as loyalty and courage are concerned. Send him down to my office before my clerks leave and let him wait outside and follow Cope. I'll give you a description of him. I'd like very much to know my Mr. Cope's friends."

Merriman's face twitched with excitement.

"I will," he said firmly. "I'll do more. I'll put the whole of this investigation in your hands, and guarantee your expenses. I know the very lad who'll suit you. Young Kain. I've had him two years. I'll send for him at once."

He stretched out his hand to the bell, but Hughes stopped him.

"You may have one or two Copes in your own works for all we know," he warned him. "Wait till I've been gone some time, and get Kain sent to you with papers from his department, if you can wangle it that way."

Merriman laughed.

"You'll have me in a false beard before you're through," he said.

"You never know," answered Hughes.

"You'll see Kain on your way out," went on Merriman. "Let me

see—yes, fourth from the entrance door in the second row from the front.”

Mr. Hughes walked back along the marble flooring. He counted down the second row. Three dull middle-aged faces, bent over their work. The fourth stool was empty, but as he watched, Mr. Hughes saw a figure returning along the back of the row. Just before sitting down, the figure surreptitiously produced a small catapult from his pocket, took swift aim, and fired. A clerk at the other end of the line clapped his hand to his head and looked round. The young man dived onto his seat, catching as he did so Mr. Hughes's astonished eye. The clerk was no less astonished; his intelligent face went blank, then he grinned apologetically. Mr. Hughes grinned back. Young Kain would do.

Miss Gregory put the cover on her typewriter and went away to get her coat and hat. Cope did the same. He lingered beside her table in passing but, finding her baskets empty, passed swiftly on and down the stairs. In the street he paused at the foot of the steps, looked to right and left, and, turning right, walked away. Kain of the Salvo Insurance Company fell in behind him.

Presently Cope turned into a pub and went up to the bar. Kain followed and eased himself in beside him. Then a man came up to Cope on the other side and began to talk to him in a low voice. Kain stared moodily before him, taking no notice.

“Looks a bit down in the mouth,” said Cope's friend.

“Who?” said Cope.

The friend nudged him, and the clerk glanced round. Kain raised his glass and without changing the direction of his gaze said aloud with great bitterness, “Damnation to the whole bunch of them!” and, draining it in one gulp, ordered another.

“Pardon me, but that sounds bad,” said Cope in a friendly way. “You're not referring to present company, I hope.”

“Oh, no,” answered Kain recklessly, “only my employers.”

“Who may they be, if it's no offense to ask?”

“Salvo. Bloody lot of swindlers!” He emptied his glass again.

Cope and his friend raised their eyebrows and nodded.

“Have another one on me,” suggested Cope. “What about you, George?”

“No, I'd better be getting along. See you later.”

Cope nodded and turned to Kain. "Come over to a table. Less crowd."

The two settled down, and young Kain was invited to air his grievances, which he did with gusto and a fluent invention.

"All these jobs are shockingly underpaid," said Cope indignantly, "but it's not much good complaining. Only lose your job. Vested interests, you know, you can't touch 'em. The best thing is to make a bit in your spare time—as I do."

"How?" Kain spoke sulkily, but his quick eyes were on the other's face.

"You've just said the claims are often turned down unfairly. I agree with you. I agree that the insurance companies deserve to be stung from time to time. I know a man who sticks up for his clients' claims and gets them, too. He's a fair marvel." He lowered his voice. "He's got agents everywhere, and he pays—handsomely. We call him the Boss. He's a real boss, I can tell you. No meanness there. If you're on the lookout for overtime, I might put you in touch—"

Miss Chandler left her post at the window of Nanny's room and went close to the bed on which the old woman lay. "He's just coming," she said cheerfully. "I'll go and put my hat on."

She left the room, and a moment later Mr. Hughes was shown in by the daily help, Mrs. Durley, a stout, short woman in a flowered overall worn over a woollen jumper.

"She's putting 'er 'at on," said Mrs. Durley, half in and half out of the door. "I'll tell 'er you're 'ere."

But there was no need of this, for Miss Chandler appeared again, wearing the same hat in which she had gone to her interview. Mr. Hughes shook hands with her and asked about the patient. Miss Chandler described a general improvement and said that the doctor, who came now once a week, was quite satisfied.

"Well, don't stay now," said Mr. Hughes at the end of her report. "You must try to be back at eight."

They walked out of the room and stood in the passage. Miss Chandler said nervously, "Oh, yes. Eight. Do you think you can manage about tea? I mean, Mrs. Durley can't stop, because she goes on to—"

"Of course I can manage."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you. I was quite prepared to stay in when Miss Lucas found she could not go on coming."

"No, you can't expect to do your work properly if you don't get time off. That's only common sense. Until I find another substitute, I shall come myself. I've brought work to do. I suppose you don't sit with the old lady all the time."

"Oh no. She wouldn't like that. She generally sleeps in the afternoon. Then I get her tea and read aloud to her or turn on the wireless—"

"Right. I shall manage."

"Then I'll just say goodbye to her."

Miss Chandler went back into the bedroom, and Mr. Hughes watched her from the door straightening the old woman's bed-clothes and making her pillows comfortable. As she passed him again on her way out, he gave her an unexpectedly warm smile that brought the blood into her cheeks and made her fumble with the door. When she had got it open and looked back, he had disappeared into the sitting room of the flat.

Some hours later Miss Chandler pushed slowly into a large West End Lyons. She had done some shopping, the first since she had started her new job, and had recklessly spent the greater part of her month's wages on a new hat, some stockings, a pair of indoor slippers, and a, for her, unusually frivolous set of Celanese undies.

The restaurant was very full and hardly less noisy than the street she had just left. A tzigane band crashed out Bohemian music at the far side of the enormous room. Miss Chandler threaded her way between the tables, ignored by ladies in long black satin who preferred to help large parties or members of the opposite sex until she reached a corner where two adults and a child were seated, using the fourth seat as a depository for their own parcels and handbags. They were deep in conversation and did not notice her until she timidly drew out the laden chair, whereupon they pounced at their property and swept it away with indignant shrugs and martyred expressions.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Chandler faintly above the din of the band. "But it's so crowded, you know."

The two women nodded absently and went on with their talk. Miss Chandler took up the menu. She was going to have a pot of tea and for a special treat, crumpets. Yes, there they were, halfway down the long list of toasted foods. She glanced about her for a

waitress; at last one came. Timidly she gave her order. "A pot of Indian tea and I think crumpets would be nice. Two crumpets."

"Crumpets are off."

"What did you say?"

"Crumpets are off. There aren't any left."

"Oh, dear." Miss Chandler was so disappointed that the tears nearly rose to her eyes. She had planned this treat a month ago, on the day she took up her new job. She had spent the first three weekly half-days at her sister's house in order to save up for her expedition to the West End, and now there were no crumpets.

"I don't know what to have," she said helplessly. The band had stopped playing, and her voice rang out embarrassingly loud. The waitress looked bored.

"Toast?" she suggested curtly.

"All right."

"White or brown?"

"Er—brown—no, white, please."

With a gesture of contempt the waitress took up her tray and went off. Presently the other occupants of the table gathered themselves together and assembled their parcels.

"Excuse me," said Miss Chandler. "That parcel is one of mine."

"Pardon?"

"I said that parcel is mine. It's my new hat."

The older of the two women opened the mouth of the bag, half drew out Miss Chandler's new modest felt, exclaimed, "My God, she's right!" and thrusting it back, restored the bag to Miss Chandler. The small boy was discovered rolling the correct bag along the floor, was checked, reprimanded, and led away protesting. Miss Chandler lovingly set her parcel to rights and rearranged her other belongings. Still no tea appeared. At last she plucked up sufficient courage to accost another waitress.

"I don't do your table," the girl said. "I'll tell her."

A minute later a new girl appeared.

"Oh, but it wasn't you—" began Miss Chandler, but the girl interrupted her.

"She's gone off," she explained. "I've just come on. Did she take your order?"

"Yes, Indian tea and toast, white toast. But I really wanted crumpets," said Miss Chandler wistfully.

The girl nodded and went away. A few minutes later she was back with a full tray, pot of Indian tea, cup and saucer, milk jug,

and, to Miss Chandler's astonishment and joy, two crumpets under a cover.

"It was muffins was off," explained the waitress, smiling.

"Oh, thank you, thank you very much indeed. It was most kind of you to make inquiries," said Margery Chandler. The girl was touched. She went away and came back with an evening newspaper. "Like to look at the paper?" she suggested.

Miss Chandler accepted with pleasure. On the front page, accompanied by a large picture, she found an account of a fire. A shop near Tottenham Court Road had been gutted. No lives had been lost, but extensive damage had been done to the stock. The fire must have started in the cellar in the early hours of that morning but had not been discovered until later. Miss Chandler was positive she had not seen it in the morning papers. The waitress looked over her shoulder as she finished serving the table behind.

"Only another old fire," she said. "It was all over by midday. Look! Did you see the picture on the back page? New British film star! Never heard of her, have you? Wonder how much she paid to get that in. Don't think much of her expression. No personality, if you know what I mean. Any pastries?"

Miss Chandler refused pastries and restored the paper to its owner. She gathered up her parcels and went, leaving the handsome tip of six shillings under the edge of her plate.

When she got back to the flat, she found Mr. Hughes in Nanny's bedroom reading aloud to the old lady. He finished his sentence, then closed the book and got up.

"I hope you enjoyed your outing," he said politely.

"Oh, yes, thank you. Very much indeed. Did you find it a nuisance getting tea?" She looked round the room. "Surely you didn't clear away?"

"Everything is exactly as you left it," said Mr. Hughes gravely.

"Washed up? Oh, you shouldn't have done that. Look, I can always do it when I get back, really I can."

"It was no trouble," Mr. Hughes assured her. "Now I must get along."

He took leave of Miss Chandler at the door of the flat.

"I hope your patient has not suffered from my efforts."

"Of course not. And thank you for sending me out with a clear conscience. I didn't expect to go out at all when I heard Miss Lucas couldn't come."

Again he gave her a warm friendly smile. Miss Chandler listened

to his footsteps die away on the stairs before she went in and shut the door of the flat.

Later that evening Hughes sat in Mr. Merriman's comfortable study, peacefully smoking one of his excellent cigars. They were not alone; Fred Purvis was there to supplement his partner's statements and also young Kain, his natural impudence a little dashed by such exalted surroundings.

Mr. Merriman sat forward to tip the ash off his cigar.

"It seems pretty conclusive," he said. "Kain was told the next fire would be somewhere in the Tottenham Court Road area, and this morning a shop in that area goes up in flames. The stock and furniture were insured with us about eight months ago. Late this afternoon a letter is handed in to us by special messenger, from Mr. Godfrey Standish, claiming the full value of all the goods insured. The fire was not mentioned in the morning papers. It first appeared in the third edition of the afternoon ones. But by that time our Mr. Standish had not only heard of it, but had taken full particulars and presumably had been on the spot soon after the fire occurred. Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong in Standish's hurrying to fires: it's his job to assess claims. But if he keeps this sort of intelligence service going, it must cost money, and I don't see that his ten percent commission on the successful claims would pay for it. Therefore, there must be something in what Kain's boastful acquaintances are saying. Some of the Standish fires are deliberately manufactured. The point is, how can we prove it? Ought we to get the police?"

"Not yet." Hughes was decided. "This Standish is a cunning bird. He'll lay off directly he thinks we're on the watch. No, let Kain go on chumming up with Cope and his friends. Try to find out if there's any connection between the Boss and the proprietors of the premises that burn. Couldn't you send him down to this latest one tomorrow as assistant to your man?"

"That's an idea."

"Get a good look at the claimant, Kain, and see if you can hear of anyone in the gang who corresponds to him. And keep your ears open for news of fresh fires about to take place. Sooner or later, Cope is going to be hauled over the coals by this boss of his for talking too freely. Really, you want to make yourself useful to the gang before that happens. I take it Cope's job is to keep an eye on my activities."

Kain nodded.

"That's right. Cope seems to think he won't get anything out of you directly. He thinks you have agents. He was telling me the other day that you interviewed a suspicious-looking woman at the office a month ago."

"Suspicious-looking! — Good God, he means Miss Chandler." Mr. Hughes lay back in his chair helpless with laughter.

When Merriman had been told the true nature of Miss Chandler's connection with the firm of Hughes and Purvis, he became very much excited.

"You mean to tell me you spent an afternoon shut up at this flat while Miss Chandler was out, and that the gang thinks she is a paid spy?"

"That's about it."

"So that they are concentrating on her while you have a perfectly good alibi whenever you choose to take advantage of it?"

"Yes, if you like to put it that way."

Merriman leaned forward impressively.

"It's a gift," he said. "Kain encourages them in their belief that Miss Chandler is your agent, and therefore indirectly ours. They follow her innocent movements and are duly mystified. You arrange her off-days when Kain gives notice of some new scheme. When she's gone and the coast is clear, you can shoot off on your own and make your investigations at the actual time the fire is going on."

"It's a scheme," said Mr. Hughes admiringly, but he shook his head. "I couldn't leave the flat, though. The old lady is quite helpless."

"Tell you what," answered Merriman, "you can have Thompson to hold the fort for you. He is the most discreet and courteous butler I have ever had. He will simply sit in the flat until you get back. Miss Chandler won't know you've been out, nor will the gang as long as we keep their attention fixed on Miss Chandler."

"I'll manage that," said Kain.

Mr. Hughes frowned.

"I suppose there is no risk to her," he said doubtfully. He was surprised at his own solicitude, but damn it, she was such a helpless poor creature except at her job. No incompetence there, he decided, remembering her skillful movements about the sick bed and Nanny's grateful, admiring eyes.

Mr. Merriman raised his eyebrows. Hughes taking an interest in a woman's welfare! Life was full of surprises.

Miss Chandler stood before the table in the little kitchen of the flat, arranging the things on the teatray. Sugar basin to the left, milk jug in the center, teapot on the right, cup and plate in front. Smiling, she put a small vase of flowers in the corner next to the teapot and stood back to look at the effect. She moved the tea caddy close up to the tray near the invalid's feeding cup. Then she straightened her hat, took up her bag and gloves, and went out towards the front door. She put her head inside the sitting room door to tell Mr. Hughes she was going. He did not come out, but he called a cheerful goodbye. Rather disappointed, she opened the front door and went down the stairs. She passed a man going up but did not pay much attention to him until as she crossed the hall she heard the front door of the flat open and Mr. Hughes's voice say, "You're early, Thompson, but never mind." Somehow she had never expected Mr. Hughes to have visitors while he was on duty, but obviously it was none of her business.

Inside the flat Hughes led the butler into the sitting room, explained his duties, which were to answer the door if anyone called, which was unlikely, and to look into the invalid's room once or twice in the middle of the afternoon and give her a drink of milk if she was awake.

After Mr. Hughes had gone himself, Thompson settled down for his vigil. He took off his coat, arranged the cushions on the sofa to his liking, and himself upon the cushions, spread newspapers over his prostrate form with one sheet over his face, and went peacefully to sleep.

At the same hour as before Miss Chandler made her way to the same Lyons restaurant as before, and to the same table in it. The kind waitress was in attendance, and at once recognized her. They greeted one another warmly.

"You're quite a stranger."

"My employer never quite knows when he can let me out. He does my work for me on my off-days."

"You don't say."

"You must tell me your name," said Miss Chandler. "I expect I shall come here a good deal when I do get the chance."

"Rose," answered the girl. "My father likes old fashioned things,

and he doesn't hold with these film star names. I'd of liked Loretta myself."

"Oh, no," said Miss Chandler. "Rose is much nicer."

A man came in and settled himself at a table nearby. He was the same man who had talked to Cope on the day that young Kain had just made contact with the gang. He opened his newspaper and stood it up between himself and Miss Chandler as a screen, from behind which he could watch her without being noticed.

While she sipped her tea and nibbled her crumpets, gazing dreamily at the crowd before her, she suddenly became aware of bells clanging in the street, at first distant and mixed with the music of the orchestra, then as the band ceased playing loud and insistent, causing all heads to turn to the window. It was a fire engine passing in the street outside.

As the noise died away in the distance Rose brought the evening paper to Miss Chandler's table and gave it to her while she made out her bill.

"It's this fire Covent Garden way," she explained. "They've been at it all the afternoon."

"How funny. I remember there was a fire in the paper the first time I came here."

"Was there? There's always fires."

Another engine clanged in the distance, came nearer, passed. Miss Chandler put on her gloves and took her bill to the pay desk. The man who was watching her called for his own.

In the crowds round the door Miss Chandler was slowly borne to the revolving exit. She passed through but immediately came in again on the other side and squeezed apologetically behind a fat man who was standing just inside the entrance. The watcher, having noted her departure, turned to pay his bill and hurried through the exit. He did not, therefore, notice her return, and stood outside gazing about him, completely at a loss.

Miss Chandler went back to the sweet stall.

"I nearly forgot Nanny's sweets," she told the girl behind the counter. "Half a pound of peppermint creams, please. What a crush it is getting in and out of the door."

"The side door isn't so bad," said the girl, pointing in its direction. She handed over the parcel. Miss Chandler looked round at the side door, nodded, and thanked her.

Outside the main door the baffled watcher gave it up and jumped onto a passing bus.

* * *

When Miss Chandler reached the flat on her return, it was opened for her, as usual, by Mr. Hughes. She thanked him, told him not to wait, and went on into Nanny's room. The old woman seemed agitated but for no apparent cause, so Miss Chandler rearranged her pillows and said cheerfully, "You'll be wanting your supper," whereupon the patient became noticeably calmer. Miss Chandler went into the kitchen, taking off her hat as she did so.

On the kitchen table stood the tray, every one of its contents in exactly the same position as she had left it. The little vase of flowers was in the corner near the teapot. For some minutes Miss Chandler stared, hardly believing her own eyes. Then she snatched up the teapot, took off its lid, looked inside, smelt it, and turning to the sink picked up the empty sink basket and stared from it to the teapot in her hand.

She was roused by Mr. Hughes's voice behind her shoulder.

"All washed up as usual. What are you staring at?"

She faced him slowly.

"You have put everything back just as I left it. It—it surprised me."

He frowned swiftly, and smiled with an effort.

"Have I been over-conscientious?"

"Oh, no. Of course not."

"Well, I must get along. I may not be able to come down again for a week or two. I'm very busy just now. But I'll ring you. Don't come to the door."

Forgetting her usual polite insistence, she obeyed him, standing by the table listening until the front door shut. When she knew that he had gone, she went back into the sitting room. On the floor lay several sheets of newspaper. She picked them up and saw again the account of the fire in Covent Garden. Putting down the paper, she went into the bedroom.

"I'm just getting your supper," she said. "Are you very hungry? You look as if you'd missed your tea."

But the old woman only smiled her usual jerky smile and shook her head.

Kain stood before Mr. Merriman's table at the offices of Salvo's. The director was looking pleased.

"You're doing very well, Kain."

"Thank you, sir. It was really that lot of information you let me

give them. It's given them confidence in me. I'll be allowed to meet the Boss soon, I am hoping."

"Good. They seem to have taken our bait, all right."

"Yes, sir. They definitely suspect Miss Chandler of spying. They sent a man after her last time. He got into a serious row because he lost sight of her in a crowd. He's begged for a second chance to show what he can do. He'll stick to her like a leech next time."

"It won't matter if he does. She will just go her innocent way."

Mr. Hughes arrived on her next afternoon off. Miss Chandler set the tray as usual and filled the kettle, putting it on the stove. Then very deliberately she opened one of the cupboards, took the tea caddy and hid it in the darkest corner, looking fearfully about her as she did so. As she was closing the cupboard door the front doorbell rang. She jumped guiltily and shutting but not locking the cupboard, ran down the passage to let in Mr. Hughes. She gave him the briefest of greetings, squeezed past him, and hurried off, leaving him staring. She did not look back as she turned out of the gate with its "To Let" sign for the bottom flat. The watcher came off the railings and followed.

Rose brought the evening paper folded neatly in a corner of her tray. Miss Chandler opened it and ran her eyes over the front page.

"Floods," said Rose, pointing to a depressing picture of a man wading up a road. "It was fires the last time, wasn't it? If it isn't one thing, it's another."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," answered Miss Chandler with a little sigh. The man at the next table but one poured himself out a second cup of tea.

Outside in Trafalgar Square the illuminated signs flashed and glowed. The ribbon news moved slowly past; "Warehouse—is—still—smouldering—Firemen—are—still—pumping—water—on—ruins—Floods—in—Thames—valley—"

A small paragraph on an inner page of her newspaper caught Miss Chandler's eye. A warehouse at Aldgate had been found burning about midnight. The fire had been got under control in the early hours of the morning, but later had burst out again. When Rose passed her table a second time, Miss Chandler pointed to the paragraph, laughing. Rose laughed, too.

This time the watcher did not fail. He followed closely behind Miss Chandler as she bought her sweets, paid her bill, and left the restaurant. He followed her down to the corner of the road, where

she stood staring out across the square. The lighted news ticked slowly past in mid-air. "Fire—at—Aldgate—warehouse—is—still—smouldering—Firemen—are—pumping—water—on—ruins—Floods—"

Miss Chandler turned abruptly and dashed back to the bus stop. "Aldgate?" she cried to the bus conductor as a Number 6 drove up.

"Other side," the man shouted, "going the other way. Over by the church."

Miss Chandler, looking in the wrong direction and risking death in the crowded one-way street, made a dart across the road. Her shadow, held up by a taxi, missed the bus onto which she climbed and had to content himself with catching the next. Miss Chandler swayed into an empty front seat and sat down.

By the light of their powerful lamps, the Fire Brigade continued their work that had begun some fourteen hours previously. Clouds of smoke and steam rose from the partly gutted building before them, while the great hoses poured a steady stream into it and the gutters flowed with the returning water. A sordid street at the best of times, made up of old fashioned decaying shops and warehouses, it now looked ten times worse, and Mr. Hughes, standing close up to the police cordon that was keeping the crowd in check, decided it was a pity the Fire Brigade was so efficient. If the whole row of ramshackle buildings had been demolished, London would have profited by their disappearance. But he could not allow these unbusinesslike feelings to interfere with his plans. So he kept on the pavement close to the wall and waited patiently with his oldest country cap pulled well down over one eye until the work slackened and the firemen began to draw off, leaving a reduced team on guard, while the police allowed the people to circulate once more, though the street was still closed to motor traffic. Under cover of the crowd that jostled slowly past, encouraged by the police to "move on and keep moving," Hughes stepped into the doorway of the empty building next to the ruin and, making his way up to the roof, climbed out through a skylight and clambered onto the roof of the damaged warehouse and down into the interior. The air was acid with smoke, making his eyes water, and started him coughing violently. Pocket torch in hand, he came out upon a staircase that was nearly all burnt away and nearly fell, sending a beam crashing down to the bottom of the empty shaft. He felt his way back and

found another staircase in the unburnt part of the building down which he went carefully until he arrived on the ground floor. Here he found what he was looking for, stacked bales of fabric, for which already that morning Mr. Godfrey Standish had sent in a claim to the Salvo Insurance Company.

Hughes inspected the bales closely. They were rolls of cretonne wrapped round with canvas and tied with rope. To his utter surprise, he found that nearly all the bales had been charred or otherwise damaged by fire.

He looked about him. This part of the building had escaped entirely. No flames had come this way. Yet here was definite evidence of damage by fire. Had they been moved or had they—

He stooped and with his pocket knife ripped out the label on one of the bales together with a piece of the burnt sacking covering it. Stuffing his prize into his pocket, he hurried back by the way he had come.

When Miss Chandler arrived on the scene the firemen were preparing to leave. She stood rather forlornly watching. She seemed to have missed the excitement, and the pavement was very wet, the road worse. As she turned to go, a man passed her and was joined by another man. Both their faces were familiar. One she recognized as Mr. Hughes's clerk Cope, but the other she could not place. Before she had fully recovered from her surprise, Mr. Hughes himself, strangely dressed in a cap and muffler, walked quickly past her. She gave a little gasp of astonishment and stepped back into a policeman.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she cried apologetically.

Cope and the shadow, who had been joined by a tall thin man with a cruel face, saw her move. They were some distance away and did not hear what she said.

"Now will you believe your own eyes?" Cope whispered. The thin man nodded.

"Looks like it. She's got something to say to the busy. Fade out, chaps. See you later."

They melted away, and when Miss Chandler looked again for Cope, he was no longer there. His place was occupied by an untidy, greasy individual who was lamenting to one of the firemen about the loss of his stock. Miss Chandler looked across at the building. A metal plate still hung sideways above one of the doors. On it she could read G. E. TUKES & CO.

* * *

She arrived at the flat in fear and trembling. If Mr. Hughes had deserted his post, how had her poor patient fared through the long afternoon?

But he opened the door to her as usual, and as usual his collar and tie were irreproachable and his bowler hat lay in its place in the hall. She hurried into the kitchen. The tray, the feeding cup, all was as she had left it, but the tea caddy that she had hidden also stood beside the tray and in the sink basket there were tea leaves.

She went into Nanny's room where she found Mr. Hughes at his old nurse's bedside.

"Everything okay in the kitchen?" he asked with a sardonic smile.

"Yes," faltered Miss Chandler.

"You forgot to put out the tea caddy. I had a devil of a job finding it."

His eyes, full of the laughter that was on his lips, held her unwilling gaze. She was helpless before his mockery.

The offices of Mr. Godfrey Standish lay through a narrow doorway wedged between two shop fronts. The staircase that led straight up from a dirty mat just inside the door was also narrow and uncarpeted.

Cope's feet clattered on it as he led Kain upwards. The first landing doors were bare except for one that had "Private" on a small dirty-white enamel plate. Cope went on up the second flight and stopped outside a door marked "Enquiries. Knock and Enter."

The room, when they had obeyed these instructions, was found to be empty of occupants. A typewriter stood on a rough wooden table on which a good many papers lay in apparent confusion. Except for the table and the chair beside it, there was no furniture. A small old fashioned gas fire flickered uncertainly on the hearth. The whole room was both dirty and dusty.

Kain had only just completed a swift survey of his surroundings when a tall, thin man came in and, saying curtly, "The Boss is waiting," turned on his heel and went out. They followed him across the landing into a larger room labeled "Godfrey Standish. Agent. Private."

The prevailing dirtiness was extended to this room also, which, though larger than the other, gave the same appearance of neglect.

Kain decided that in spite of the files and typewriters and the telephone on the desk, the office was not intended for the reception of clients so much as for the planning of business coups.

Standish was sitting behind one of the tables talking to the thin man, whom he called Paul. Cope introduced Kain. Standish looked at him closely, but in silence, and then motioned to Paul to provide seats for the newcomers. As the latter was bringing in the solitary chair from the other room, two more men arrived and stood to attention against the wall. They were followed by others until ten in all had collected including Cope and Kain, Paul and Standish. One of them was the man who had followed Miss Chandler, and another was the stout Mr. G. E. Tukes who had just lost the greater part of his warehouse.

Without a word the men filed up to Mr. Standish's table and were each presented with a pay envelope. Some broke theirs open and pocketed the contents; others stuffed the envelope away whole. Mr. Paul, at Standish's elbow, ticked off numbers on a list he held. The men went away as silently as they came, not all together, but in ones or twos at intervals. At last, besides Cope and Kain, only Tukes and Paul were left. Standish reached in a drawer for a box of cigars and handed them round.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Kain," he said affably.

Cope sat forward nervously on the edge of his chair.

"Mr. Hughes sent that woman out again today. Fielder didn't lose her this time—followed her right down. She was there when we left, talking to a busy. Kain here says Salvo's have put a special man onto all your work. He'll be down there first thing tomorrow."

Standish nodded approvingly. He turned to Tukes.

"What about it?"

"Some of the stuff went up in the blaze. I'll move the rest out tonight."

"Can you? They'll be keeping an eye on the warehouse after that second outbreak."

"The building next door is empty and has a back entrance off an alley. I'll manage. We'll have to repack the cretonne after this, all that's left of it."

"Why not get the girls to make it up into cushion covers? Bring it forward again as fancy goods."

They all laughed except Tukes, who shook his head solemnly.

"Not suitable," he said. "But we might consider bedspreads."

Standish suddenly became serious.

"Who is this woman of Hughes's?"

Cope leaned forward.

"She was engaged answering an advertisement for a nurse-companion. That may have been a code, of course. Perhaps Hughes has had her work for him before. She lives in the first floor flat of a converted house. Top floor, an elderly woman with a daughter in business, bottom floor been empty the last few weeks. The last three times we've had a job on in London, Hughes has gone down there in the afternoon and this woman has been in the offing. She waits till dark to do her stuff, and she's as slippery as an eel."

"But this last time Fielder managed to stick tight, and warned you in time. That's not quite good enough. Paul, you'd better move into that empty ground floor flat. Your wife will chum up with—Miss Chandler, isn't it? She will find out what she pretends to be doing, and you will both arrange to accompany her on her next expedition. Meanwhile, Fielder will stay in your ground floor flat and watch for Hughes, taking note of anyone who comes to visit him or any activity on the part of our enterprising solicitor."

He grinned unpleasantly. Kain felt that his own position would not be very enjoyable could Mr. Standish see into his mind. Paul shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll go and see the house agents right away," he said.

Miss Chandler was reading the newspaper to Nanny when there was a discreet knock at the door and a broad red face appeared round the corner of it.

"Excuse me, miss, but where does your main turn off?"

"Oh dear, I don't know," said Miss Chandler, getting up hurriedly. She went out to the kitchen and gazed helplessly at the pipes that ran along the walls and twined together under the sink. The plumber had deposited his bag of tools and blow lamp on the kitchen table and was bent in half trying to sort out the water supply.

"It's these converted houses," said Miss Chandler. "I shouldn't wonder if the water turns off downstairs in the former kitchen of the house."

"I thought o' that," returned the plumber, straightening up and scratching his head. "I bin down and arst the lady. She got a separate supply, see. So you ought to have the same."

"What would it look like?"

"Might be a ordinary straight tap, or one o' them round-'anded screw-down sort, see."

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Miss Chandler, brightening. "It's in the bathroom."

She led the way there and displayed proudly the incoming main rising through the floor with stop-cock attached.

"That's 'er," said the plumber. "'Ot tap, I think you said, miss?"

"Yes, please. The hot tap in the kitchen. I think it's only the washer, but you'd better see what you find."

"Okay, miss."

Margery Chandler left him to it and returned to her charge. Almost at once the bell rang. When she opened it, she found a tall woman in an elegant overall on the doorstep.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you would mind asking your plumber to look in downstairs again before he goes. I've got a leak I want him to see to. I'm Mrs. Paul, your new neighbor."

"How do you do? Of course I'll tell him."

"Thanks ever so. It's so good of you. If your telephone is out of order any time, don't hesitate to come and borrow ours, will you?"

Mr. Hughes and Fred Purvis were working late. The outer office was deserted and dark, its typewriters covered and its desks and tables cleared and tidy. But in Mr. Hughes's room confusion reigned. His table, the chairs, and even the floor were covered with stacks of files and papers. The two partners in shirtsleeves, with tousled hair, read and searched and read again. Suddenly Mr. Hughes slapped his hand down on his desk.

"It works," he cried triumphantly.

"Which does?"

"The cretonne. The flowered cretonne that was not burnt in the fire at G. E. Tukes's warehouse in spite of the fact that it was covered with scorched wrappings and a partly burnt label, Exhibit One."

Hughes unlocked a drawer and took out the label he had detached at the warehouse.

"Listen," he said. "This cretonne started life in the cotton mills of Lancashire. It went to a wholesale firm who sold it to Mr. G. E. Tukes, who calls himself a general dealer. Mr. Tukes sold it to a small draper in Worcester. This shop was burnt down two years ago. The salvaged goods, including our cretonne, were bought by

Mr. Tukes, general dealer. The shop got compensation from an insurance company. The cretonne, diminished in bulk but insured again as new material, next appears in a fire at Yarmouth ten months ago. Again it was paid on by the insurance companies, and again it was taken over by Mr. Tukes. Its last public appearance to date was in the recent fire on Mr. Tukes's own premises. It was, as I have told you, unscathed on that occasion. Nevertheless, it is reported in the claim to Salvo's as 'hopelessly damaged' and is put down at full value for new stock."

"Wonderful," said Fred Purvis. "For sheer bare-faced cheek, the thing is magnificent."

"That's only one example," answered Hughes. "But it's the clearest and most complete. You know, Fred, I think I'll take it along to Merriman. He's got a better safe in his house than I have here."

He fixed the warehouse documents together with a clip and added the burnt label and the price of packing. As he did so Fred Purvis came away from the window.

"The two men who have been showing so much interest in this block are still holding one another up on the other side of the road," he said.

"Can't help their trouble," replied Mr. Hughes. "Help me clear up this mess, Fred."

A little later the two men emerged into the street. Mr. Hughes was carrying a small black leather case, securely tucked under one arm. As he and Fred turned into High Holborn, several men came along the footpath with arms linked, laughing and singing. They bore down on the partners, jostled into them without unlinking, pushed past and away again. Mr. Hughes gave an audible cry and began looking about on the ground. One of the men looked back, and the whole party hurried away at a fast walk. Mr. Hughes seized Fred's arm and boarded a passing taxi.

"As I thought," he said, mopping his forehead. "They got the case. Much good may it do them."

"What was in it?" asked Fred, grinning.

"My morning copy of the *Times*," replied Mr. Hughes, unbuttoning his coat to show Fred the precious documents safe in the inner pocket.

Mr. Merriman shut the door of his private safe on the papers and walked restlessly up and down.

"That's a brilliant bit of work, Hughes," he said, "but it stops

short at Standish. It won't do us a pennyworth of good unless we can get the final connection. If we take a case against Tukes, we shall probably be successful in eliminating him for the time being. But Standish is left in as boss and the main organization goes on."

"Still, we know we are on the right lines," said Purvis. "Sooner or later we shall link up to Standish. I think we just have to carry on, and take our opportunities as we find them."

"I've one bit of news for you," Merriman said, stopping his restless pacing and coming back to the other two. "Kain reports that the two members of the gang who are now in the flat below Miss Chandler are thoroughly disappointed so far. They were surprised to find a bona fide invalid upstairs, and they say Miss Chandler is perfectly friendly but as slippery as an eel. The Boss has come to the conclusion that either Miss Chandler is very, very wily indeed or that Cope is completely wrong about her. Cope is a little out of favor in consequence, which makes things more difficult for Kain. I shall have to think up another present for him to give Mr. Standish."

The three men laughed, but Hughes shook his head.

"I don't like those people coming to the downstairs flat, and still less the way they are cultivating Margery Chandler. She keeps her eyes open, that girl. She suspects something going on behind her back the days I take over for her. Thompson let me down over the tea things. He didn't use them. If she gets too friendly with this Mrs. Paul, she may begin confiding her suspicions to her."

Purvis glanced up.

"You'll have to use a different technique now the Pauls are there."

Hughes nodded.

"I know. I've got it all taped. I'm going down soon, fires or no fires, to try it out."

Miss Chandler filled the kettle at the kitchen tap and put it back on the gas stove. The teatray stood ready in its accustomed place on the table. She went next into the bathroom and, stooping, turned the tap the plumber had used to stop the water's coming through the main. This done she began to put on her hat, first rather tremulously trying a little makeup on her face. The result was quite astonishingly successful.

Mr. Hughes, when the door was opened to him, thought the same.

His superior, rather pitying attitude to Miss Chandler suffered a shock. He became unaccountably shy.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," he said humbly.

"No, of course not. You never do."

Miss Chandler was warmed by his gentle speech: she began to suffer from remorse at the thought of the trap she had laid for him. They looked into one another's eyes, and Margery Chandler turned away her head.

"I must go," she said in a low voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Paul are taking me to the pictures."

"Indeed." In his sharp interest at this move Mr. Hughes spoke more emphatically than he intended. Miss Chandler flushed.

"Why shouldn't I?" she said indignantly.

Mr. Hughes realized the hopelessness of trying to explain himself. He shrugged his shoulders and turned deliberately and rudely away.

"I simply don't understand you," cried Margery, bold in her exasperation. She slammed the front door behind her, and Mr. Hughes heard her running downstairs.

He darted into the front room and waited by the window. Almost at once he saw a trio emerge from the front door and walk out into the street. Miss Chandler was in the middle with the two Pauls one on either side. Almost immediately after they had disappeared Thompson walked in at the gate. Mr. Hughes welcomed him at the door of the flat.

"Miss Chandler has gone out with friends," said Hughes gravely. "The new tenants, in fact. We seem to be left in possession as usual."

Thompson sniffed.

"There's a person in a Homburg hat sitting behind the curtains downstairs, sir. The hat is a good deal the worse for wear, if I may say so."

"Then we will have our little practice as planned," said Mr. Hughes.

He went into the kitchen, smiled at the preparations for tea, and shook some tea leaves out of the teacaddy into the sink. He had his hand on the tap when Thompson came in with Mr. Hughes's attaché case.

"Is this the one, sir?"

"Yes. You might be getting it out, Thompson."

"Very good, sir." While the butler opened the case and took out

the rope ladder that was coiled up inside it, Mr. Hughes caught up the kettle and emptied it over the tea leaves in the sink basket. This done, he put the empty kettle back in its place.

"You know, life would be simpler, Thompson, if you drank tea like a normal British subject."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Mr. Hughes put on his cap and muffler and hung the rope ladder out the kitchen window where it lay in the angle between two walls. Then he drew it up again. The two men put their heads out the window, considering their plan of action.

"I can't be seen from the front of the house," explained Mr. Hughes, "and I need not go round that way. If I get through the hedge down there, I'm in a narrow lane that separates this garden from the next. It is an old right of way, I expect. It must lead somewhere. I shall follow it away from the road. The only snag is the window below. I think it might be a good plan if you were to rivet the attention of the gentleman in the Homburg hat by walking down to the gate, looking out, counting twenty, and walking back. This is my spare key to the flat so that you can let yourself in again. Be on the watch for me in an hour's time."

"Yes, sir."

When Mr. Hughes had dropped the rope ladder once more and had his leg over the sill, Thompson went down to the front gate as planned. Mr. Hughes swayed his way down the ladder. By the time Thompson got back to the kitchen window and the watcher in the flat below had relaxed again, the solicitor had disappeared. Thompson wound up the ladder, and with a face of faint disgust took up the feeding cup to prepare Nanny a drink of milk.

Miss Chandler, escorted by the Pauls, moved up the steps of the local cinema, a gaudy modern suburban building. They crossed the magnificent lounge and were shown into three seats in the middle of a row. On the screen two lovers were locked in their final embrace. The feature ended, and the newsreel came on. After the usual opening ceremony with a closeup of several politicians, a football match, and a boat wrecked on a rocky shore, there was a picture of a fire in Leeds at a small general store. This comparatively obscure establishment had found a place in the news chiefly because it was next door to a veterinary surgeon's animal hospital, the patients from which were evacuated by the staff and willing helpers from among the police and watching crowds. Mild laughter

greeted the facetious remarks of the commentator, but Miss Chandler took no part in this, for she had received a severe shock. A closeup of the owner of the warehouse in conversation with the veterinary surgeon was exhibited. The fat, greasy little man was unmistakable—none other than Mr. Tukes of Aldgate.

In her surprise and bewilderment Miss Chandler exclaimed aloud. She was immediately aware of a stiffening in the seats on either side of her. Looking from one to the other she saw the Pauls exchange significant glances.

Mr. Hughes, from behind the hedge, threw up a pebble, which struck the kitchen window of the flat. It was opened at once by Thompson and the rope ladder was lowered. Mr. Hughes climbed up rapidly and the rope ladder was withdrawn, but not a moment too soon. For the watcher in the flat below, bored with his long vigil, had begun to prowls about, and as he walked into the kitchen he heard the click of the rope ladder as it scraped over the sill above. He darted to the window, thrust it up, and looked out, just too late to see the upper window softly closed. He was back in the sitting room, however, in time to see Thompson walk out into the road.

Miss Chandler let herself into the flat with her own key and closed the door very gently behind her. Mr. Hughes's bowler hat and overcoat were lying on the chair in the passage. She stood still and listened. From Nanny's room came the sound of his voice, continuous, rising and falling. He was evidently reading aloud to the old woman.

She began to feel in the pockets of his overcoat. First she found the cap and recognized it as the one he had worn at the Aldgate fire. In another pocket she found a revolver. That startled her, so that she left the overcoat and crept on tiptoe past Nanny's room to the kitchen. The electric light switch clicked loudly as she moved it, but the reading voice continued smoothly without interruption. Miss Chandler inspected the tray, the kettle, and the sink basket. Then she put out a trembling hand and turned on the tap. No water fell from it. As she stared at this confirmation of her fears a shadow moved across the sink. She turned with a gasp. Mr. Hughes stood close to her, smiling affably.

"I like to leave everything as I find it," he said.

Before Miss Chandler could reply, he strode out of the room with

a movement astonishingly swift for a man of his size. The next moment, with a cough and a splutter, the water rushed from the tap, drenching Miss Chandler, who leaped away in alarm and indignation. Mr. Hughes returned as swiftly as he went, and turned off the tap.

"I thought you wanted to use the water," he explained innocently.

"You didn't! You did it on purpose!" Miss Chandler was breathless, terrified, but not defeated. "And you didn't know I'd turned it off, which I did on purpose. On purpose, I tell you. Because I know now what you do on my afternoons out—leaving poor Nanny all alone in the flat for anything to happen."

"I do not leave her alone."

"You do. You pretend to have tea and clean it up, but you never have tea at all. It's a lie if you say you do."

"No, I have not had tea here for some time."

"I knew it! You go out as soon as my back's turned. I know you do. I saw you in the cap you have out there in the hall, at that fire in Aldgate. And you know I was there—I can see it in your face."

"Yes, I know you were there. But I did not see you there."

"I don't know what you're doing, but it's always fires—every time I go out. Even today, at the cinema—that fire in Leeds, with the same man who owned the place at Aldgate."

"What?"

Mr. Hughes stepped up to her and in his excitement seized her arm.

"You know it yourself! You must know! Tukes. G. E. Tukes. I saw it on a board at Aldgate. That's his name. Why are his houses burning? What are you doing? Why are you doing it?" She checked herself and said more quietly, "I shall go to the police."

Mr. Hughes looked at her with admiration.

"Oh, I don't think that would be wise—not just at present," he said quietly. "But I think you will have to go from here."

Miss Chandler faced him squarely.

"Are you giving me notice? Because I tell you I won't leave Nanny in the lurch. You know it won't be easy to find anyone to take my place. But I'm not going till you do. You may not care what happens to her. You only put her here so that you could sneak off on the quiet and nobody know about it. I won't desert her whatever you do to me."

"My dearest girl," said Mr. Hughes surprisingly. "I shall not leave Nanny in the lurch, nor you either."

With that he left the room and the flat. Margery Chandler crumpled up on a kitchen chair and burst into tears.

Standish, Tukes, and Paul sat round the table of the dirty office in High Holborn. Paul was gloomy, Tukes ill at ease. Standish eyed them both sardonically.

"You are a bright lot, the pair of you," he snapped at them. "George poses for a closeup and Henry takes the little spy to see his picture. Just after I told you, George, to be careful at Leeds. You knew that cretonne had been tampered with before."

"It was that bloody little vet," grumbled Mr. Tukes. "He got talking and I didn't notice the cameras till it was too late. I tried to turn my back."

"Exposing your unmistakable profile," snarled Standish. "You are all kinds of a fool, George."

"Well, you can't pick on me," said Paul slowly. "I couldn't know what would be in the newsreel."

"You might have guessed."

Paul did not bother to answer; he spat into the grate instead.

"I propose," said Mr. Standish, choosing his words carefully, "to liquidate this concern, and have a rest for an indefinite period, *incognito*."

"Where do we come in?" Tukes asked gently.

"I thought," replied Standish, not answering him directly, "that we might have one final combustion. I have a very pretty little plan. I'll tell you about it. The proceeds should set us up for two years at least. Then if we want to start again, I think with me to organize the outfit we quite safely might."

"What about the others?" asked Paul. "Some of them have seen you—and been up here, too."

"When I am no longer here that has no significance." Standish frowned. "But Cope now. He is too close to that damned solicitor. I think," said the Boss very quietly, "that Cope knows too much."

Paul spat again.

"Okay," he said.

"What about the young man from Salvo's—Kain?" asked Mr. Tukes.

The Boss considered.

"He's been up here once, but we've never given him a job to do, as we have Cope. Perhaps he wouldn't have bungled it as Cope did those papers. We've only listened to Kain's news. He wouldn't dare

speak for fear of being shown up. We can leave him out—or postpone him, anyway. Look more normal one at a time.”

“Okay,” said Paul again.

Miss Gregory took the cover off her typewriter and arranged her work about her. She glanced up at the office clock, which said ten A.M., and across to Cope’s empty table. The other two clerks were busy at work.

Before she could start her letters the bell rang for her. She went into Mr. Hughes’s room.

“Cope turned up yet, Miss Gregory?”

“No, Mr. Hughes.”

“Right. Ask Mr. Purvis if he would kindly come across, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Hughes.”

Fred Purvis came at once. Hughes looked up at him.

“Cope hasn’t arrived yet. I don’t like it.”

“Have you spoken to Merriman?”

“No.”

“It might be as well to know if young Kain has turned up.”

Hughes nodded and got through to Salvo’s. The answer was satisfactory; the young man was in his place.

“Get Kain to make contact with the gang at lunchtime if possible and see if he can hear anything.”

Hughes did not know that at about the same time the River Police, patrolling off Tower Bridge, directed their launch to a dark shape in the water and found it to be the dead body of an unknown man.

Miss Chandler, after a night of agitation and anxiety, decided to get in touch with her sister, implore her to come over, and discuss the whole situation with her. Consequently, when she had let in Mrs. Durley, the charwoman, and had finished with her own and Nanny’s breakfasts, she took up the telephone to ask for her sister’s number. There was no reply from the exchange, no buzzing, nothing at all. She tried for several minutes, then with a sinking heart put back the receiver. Mr. Hughes had cut off the telephone.

Slowly and with mounting fear she wrote a short note, found a stamp, and ran out to take her written appeal to the post.

But again she was frustrated. As she reached the bottom of the stairs the front door of the ground floor flat opened and Mrs. Paul came out dressed for the street, with a shopping bag on her arm.

She saw the letter in Miss Chandler's hand and stretched out her own for it.

"I can post that for you," she said gaily. "I'm just off to the shops."

"Oh, no. I want to take it. I—I want the air."

"You aren't ill, are you?" asked Mrs. Paul, staring at her. "You don't look up to much. I'd go and have a lie down if I were you. I'll post your letter. It's no trouble, really."

She was blocking the way, and Margery Chandler saw that resistance was hopeless without the open breach she dared not risk. She gave up her letter with a little moan of distress and stumbled back upstairs, pushing the front door open nearly into Mrs. Durley's face. The charwoman knelt upright in great indignation.

"Mind 'oo you shovin'," she said angrily.

Miss Chandler looked at the vindictive expression on Mrs. Durley's broad face, and a fresh fear twitched her mind. Was Mrs. Durley also part of this conspiracy, this net that was beginning to close about her in punishment for her curiosity? The charwoman, seeing the stark terror in Miss Chandler's eyes, lumbered to her feet and took her by the arm, her face melting into its accustomed genial smile.

"Lor-love-a-duck! Whatever's bin upsettin' you?" she exclaimed. "Let me get you a nice 'ot cup o' tea."

At lunchtime Kain went to the pub where he was accustomed to meet Cope. The clerk was not there, but Fielder and another man were drinking at the bar. Kain joined them and ordered half a pint of draught beer and a sandwich. The others took no apparent notice of him. When he had been served, he raised his mug to the man next to him.

"Here's how!" he said pleasantly. The man muttered a reply but was turning away again when Kain touched his arm.

"Has Cope been in?" he asked.

"Who?" he said.

"Cope."

"Don't know him." Very deliberately he turned his back on the young man.

But Kain was not to be put off so easily. He laughed, as if in appreciation of a good joke, and said cheerfully, "That's a good one, considering he's been having lunch with us most days for the last few months."

Fielder turned again with a stony face.

"You're making some mistake," he said quietly. "I don't know anyone of the name of Cope, and as for you, young fellow, I've never set eyes on you before today."

He nodded to his companion and the pair of them left the public house together. Ignoring the curious looks of the other customers, Kain went on with his lunch.

Mr. Merriman was just finishing his dinner that evening when Thompson announced Hughes and Purvis. The three men adjourned to Merriman's study and coffee was brought.

"I had the police round this afternoon," said Mr. Hughes. "It was Cope they took out of the river this morning, apparently drowned, but there had been a blow on the head possibly sustained in falling."

"Or possibly administered before falling," said Fred Purvis.

"We shall have to give our information to the police now," said Merriman. "I should have liked to finish the case without them, but Cope's death makes that impossible. I hope young Kain is in no danger."

"I imagine he is in considerable danger. Can't you send him abroad or something?"

"Hardly—at the moment. But we could get him police protection, I expect." He got up and went to the telephone. "I'm taking no chances," he explained to the others. "I'm not going to leave this room till the guilty secret is revealed. Scotland Yard owes me a visit anyhow. But that's another story."

Detectives went through Mr. Hughes's accumulated evidence, they went through the Salvo archives, they searched the abandoned empty office in High Holborn, they hung about the pub that Cope and his friends had frequented, but they found nothing. Apart from the Pauls, who continued to lead a blameless life in the lower flat or at Paul's furniture shop in East Ham, the gang had melted away into thin air. The second day passed and no progress had been made.

During these two days Miss Chandler passed from a state of agitated anxiety into one of downright panic. She had attempted to get her telephone restored to action by ringing up exchange at the nearest public telephone box. But when she approached the box, a man had pushed past her and entered it. She had a feeling that she had seen this man before. She dared not ask Mrs. Paul's permission to use the downstairs phone, she dared not ask Mrs.

Durley to take a message for her. Twice more she had been intercepted on her way to the post, and relieved of letters to Florrie. The fact that she received no answers from her sister indicated that these letters never found their way into the post.

On the second day she took her basket and went shopping. She walked slowly, keeping her eyes open for suspicious persons. She intended to call at the post office for stamps and at the same time tell them there about her telephone. There were a good many people in the post office when she arrived, and she had to stand in a small queue at the section devoted to stamps. When her turn came, she made her purchase and was about to continue with her complaint when a woman next to her bumped her arm in such a way that she dropped her bag and had to stoop to pick it up. The woman stooped, too, hindering more than she helped and full of voluble apologies. When Margery Chandler stood upright again, she found that the queue had closed in behind her and her chance of speaking was gone unless she cared to wait or to tackle one of the other assistants. At this moment, as she stood hesitating, the woman who had made her drop her bag looked at her and smiled. It was a friendly smile, still a trifle apologetic, but to Margery's overwrought imagination it was a smile of triumph, a sinister smile, warning her that her efforts were fruitless. She shrank away and left the post office, her purpose unfulfilled.

Her next port of call was the grocer. Here she chose bacon and watched it being cut on the machine. The other customers round her seemed harmless enough; she thought she might screw up her courage to ask the man behind the counter for permission to use the shop's telephone. But as she made her request in a low, trembling voice, the man caught the eye of an acquaintance passing outside on the street. He nodded and winked, then pulled his pencil from behind his ear and made out Miss Chandler's bill.

"Just the bacon, wasn't it?" he said, looking up. His surprise at the blanched state of Miss Chandler's countenance fixed his own in an open stare. Her panic grew. Again she saw the features before her distorted, threatening. The conspiracy against her was growing. If the familiar grocer's assistant was receiving signals from the street. She snatched her parcel from his outstretched hand and fled.

She dared not wait to finish her shopping now. She must get back before it was too late. Inside the locked door of the flat there would be respite. Unless she could tell the police! Seeing a tall,

uniformed figure approaching, she hurried towards it. Hardly had she got within speaking distance of him, however, when a stoutish woman, smartly dressed, stopped him to inquire the way to an address. Miss Chandler caught the woman's eye in passing. To her now fevered mind it looked at her with a hard, ruthless glance that froze her blood. She quickened her pace, half-running now, but desperately eager to find help in her extremity.

Then her heart leaped with renewed hope. Near the island in the middle of the road at a pedestrian crossing stood another policeman. Not looking at the oncoming traffic, she plunged towards him. A car missed her by inches, the owner leaning out to curse her as he passed.

Miss Chandler wilted, clutching her parcel and her bag. So they would stop at nothing!

"He tried to run me over," she cried breathlessly to the constable.

"You should look before you cross," answered the officer severely.

"You can't blame the driver if you step off sudden, like you did."

"He tried—" began Miss Chandler again, but the constable stepped forward, held up the traffic on the other half of the road, and motioned her across. She turned to look at him reproachfully, but he had already released the waiting vehicles and they swept forward, cutting him off from her sight. She was abandoned to her fate. With tears running down her cheeks she started for home.

A little later Margery Chandler knelt at the bedside of her charge.

"You do understand, Nanny, don't you?" she cried again and again. "It's because I daren't stay here any longer, but I won't leave you, except in proper hands. If I say you're worse, they'll have to believe me. I'll come back to you if I can. But I daren't stay. I daren't stay."

The old woman slowly shook her head.

When Miss Chandler knocked at the front door of the downstairs flat a few minutes afterwards, it was opened by Mrs. Paul.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Miss Chandler?" she said in a rather loud voice.

"I wonder if I might use your phone," said the companion boldly. "Mine is out of order, and they haven't been to mend it yet. But my invalid has had a turn for the worse. I'm quite frightened about her. I want to get the doctor to see her."

"I'm ever so sorry to hear that," answered Mrs. Paul. "Won't you come inside? The phone is in the sitting room."

In fear and trembling Margery followed her. The room into which she was led looked out onto the front gate and the road. There had been voices inside as she drew near it, but when Mrs. Paul opened the door only Mr. Paul was within, sitting on the arm of a chair.

"Miss Chandler wants to phone for the doctor," explained Mrs. Paul. She led the companion to the telephone, which stood on a small table. Timidly Miss Chandler unhooked the receiver.

Mr. Hughes was in the office when the doctor rang up. He listened to the report and answered, "Are you speaking from the flat?" At the doctor's answer he whistled softly. "I'll come down at once." Then he went across to his partner's room.

"Miss Chandler has taken the law into her own hands," he announced.

"How?" inquired Fred Purvis, interested.

"She called in Dr. Wilson and told him Nanny was worse and ought to go into hospital. When he said he saw no signs of any serious development, she flatly refused to continue in charge, said she wouldn't take the responsibility. So he has just rung up to ask what he should do. Now this is the most significant point of the whole thing. I asked him if he was still at the flat, and what do you think he said?"

"Can't imagine."

"He said Miss Chandler's phone wasn't working, so he was ringing up from downstairs. Laugh that off!"

"Gosh, that's awkward. Downstairs will think all sorts of things."

"They'll think Margery Chandler has chosen a damned clever way of concentrating her forces. But I'm going down. The poor kid sounds half crazy with fright, according to Wilson. Babbling about being followed and being cut off from the outer world. I'd like to know why her phone isn't working."

"She'll hardly welcome you as you deserve, since she has cast you for the head villain's part," suggested Purvis.

"I can't help that. She'll know better when we're through with the job."

"Much better to tell the police and leave it to them," said Purvis. Hughes considered.

"No. I'd like to get the girl clear before we start any possibility

of a roughhouse. But if I don't ring you up here or at your place by eight, you can do anything that occurs to you."

"Right, I will. Take care of yourself."

Mr. Hughes went back to his own room and shut up his papers in the safe. He unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out a revolver and looked at it, then, shrugging his shoulders, put it away again. Taking his hat he walked out of the office.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it," said Mr. Hughes to Dr. Wilson, "that Miss Chandler must have a complete rest. She can go back to her sister for a couple of weeks, and we must get Nanny back into hospital. They know me well there. Let me come down to the phone with you and add my voice to yours if necessary."

Miss Chandler opened the front door for them. Dr. Wilson smiled reassuringly at her.

"We'll send the patient into hospital again for a bit, and you can have a rest," he said kindly.

"Oh, thank you," breathed Margery Chandler.

When the two men had gone, she hurried into Nanny's room and began to sort out the things the old woman would have to take with her.

Meanwhile the doctor and Mr. Hughes were admitted to the downstairs flat by Mrs. Paul. The sitting room was quite empty, but Mr. Hughes noticed that Mrs. Paul stood near the door, which she did not close.

When the necessary arrangements had been made for the transfer to hospital, Mr. Hughes quietly took over the receiver and called the exchange.

"My telephone is out of order," he complained, and gave details. Exchange promised to investigate the fault. Mr. Hughes hung up.

As Mrs. Paul showed him out of the flat, a telephone bell began to ring upstairs.

"That sounds like Miss Chandler's phone," said Mrs. Paul with a slow, unpleasant smile.

"So it does," agreed Mr. Hughes.

The doctor looked grave.

"I'm afraid I didn't test the accuracy of Miss Chandler's statement about the phone," he said. "But it would seem as if we were justified in relieving her of responsibility at present. You will be able to manage now, won't you?"

Mr. Hughes said yes, and thanked him. The doctor drove away,

while the solicitor went back to Miss Chandler. She approached him, half fearful, half defiant.

"The phone is working again," she said.

"So I heard," replied Mr. Hughes.

"They cut it off from downstairs, I know they did," went on Miss Chandler, her face working. "They didn't want me to speak to anyone. They took my letters, they followed me about, they tried to kill me. Now they've put it right. I expect you told them to!" She was aghast at what she had said, but she stood her ground.

"You had better get your things together and go now," said Mr. Hughes quietly. "I will go with Nanny to the hospital."

"I won't!" Miss Chandler's voice was low but exceedingly obstinate. "I'm not going to leave her till she's safe out of this awful place."

"If I hadn't fallen in love with you," answered Mr. Hughes steadily, "I should shake your silly head off."

"Oh!" Miss Chandler's voice rose to a high squeak of indignant, impotent rage. But as she had no answer to this devastating remark, she fled into Nanny's room to complete her preparations.

"I'll take the doctor's letter myself," she explained to the old woman, "but I want you to look after these notes, in case anything should happen to prevent—"

She did not finish her sentence but tucked a small folded piece of paper into the old woman's clenched and paralyzed left hand.

"There. Now it can't slip out, and it'll be there in case—"

The white L.C.C. ambulance drew up outside the gate, and the ambulance men came inside, bringing their stretcher with them. Miss Chandler went down to meet them.

While she was out of Nanny's room, Mr. Hughes slipped in and bent over the invalid.

"It won't be for long," he said. "Do you understand, Nanny? Not long. Soon I'll be able to tell her all about it, but till then it's safer for her as it is."

He caught sight of the note in the old woman's hand and slipping it out, read it rapidly, chuckling as he did so. Then with lightning speed he snatched a pencil out of his pocket, crossed out Margery's lurid appeal, and wrote a few short sentences instead. He finished, putting the note back just as the ambulance men entered the bedroom. After greeting them, he left the room and went downstairs.

The front door of the ground floor flat, he noticed, was ajar. With

a swift movement he put his foot into the gap. As he expected, Mrs. Paul was just inside, listening. He wasted no time but clapped a hand over her mouth and held it there, pinning her arms with his own. Voices came from the sitting room behind their silent struggling forms. The voice of Mr. Paul rose faintly above the murmur.

"We go in from the Fulham Road?"

Another voice exclaimed loudly, "No, you fool, from the back. Tukes is supposed to have been there all the time working."

Mr. Hughes heard the ambulance men coming down with their burden. He dared not continue to hold Mrs. Paul. He released her as quickly as he had made her prisoner and joined the group that had now reached the foot of the stairs.

Three men including Mr. Paul were sitting round a bridge table on which lay a sketch map. They raised their heads as Mrs. Paul shot, breathless, into the room.

"Hughes!" she gasped.

The three men jumped to their feet.

"What about him?"

"He forced the door open! He heard what you were saying! I couldn't do a thing. He had hold of me, nearly choking me!"

Paul bounded past her to the door of the room.

"Has he gone?"

"How do I know? I came straight in to tell you."

At the front door Mr. Hughes took Miss Chandler's arm and said rapidly, "I am not mad. Remember this. The Fulham Road. Have you got it? Fulham Road."

Miss Chandler shook herself free and without a word hurried after the stretcher.

"I'll come along with you," Mr. Hughes said to the ambulance men, "if you've room for me as well as the lady."

Miss Chandler bit her lip. At all costs she must shake him off. The thought of being shut up in the ambulance with a helpless invalid and a man who was obviously insane was more than she could contemplate.

"Oh dear," she cried helplessly, "I forgot to shut the door of the flat, or the windows."

"I'll go," said Mr. Hughes, not suspecting her of guile. Miss Chandler climbed into the ambulance but a second later she put out her head.

"I think we ought to start," she said. "The patient looks worse to me. Doctor said it was urgent."

The ambulance driver was already in his seat. The second man had his hand on the steps.

"Mr. Hughes is sure to follow," said Miss Chandler. "I'll explain to him why we didn't wait."

"Okay, miss," said the man. He shut the door and jumped to his seat beside the driver, and the ambulance started just as Mr. Hughes, running down the stairs, arrived in the hall. He saw the tail of the ambulance pass away down the road. Immediately afterwards a man turned in at the gate. Hughes stepped aside to allow him to pass into the hall, but the man stood on the top step looking over the solicitor's shoulder. His gaze was so fixed that Hughes swung round. Three men and Mrs. Paul had come out of the ground floor flat and were ranged behind him, waiting silently. Mrs. Paul broke the silence.

"It is Mr. Hughes, isn't it? We have met before—quite recently." Her smile was cruelly triumphant. "You must allow me to return good for evil and offer you a drink."

Hughes measured his chances four to one, not counting Mrs. Paul. The noise of a scuffle might penetrate to the street, but the house stood well back from the road. Besides, an open quarrel or fight would serve no useful purpose. Paul himself might be fairly important, but the other men were not. Kain's description of Tukes and the Boss did not fit any of those present.

With a shrug and a smile he bowed.

"Delighted," he said, and walked forward into the flat. The four men followed and shut the door.

The ambulance men deposited the patient in a cubicle in the casualty department of the hospital and went away. The nurse at the reception desk began to take particulars from Miss Chandler, while another nurse went into the cubicle to attend to Nanny.

Presently a house physician in a white coat arrived. Seeing Miss Chandler still struggling with the questionnaire, he went on into the cubicle. But he soon reappeared and went up to the reception desk.

"Did you come with this patient?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Miss Chandler.

"I found this paper in her hand."

"Oh!" cried Margery Chandler, very flustered, "I quite forgot. I put it there in case I was prevented from coming. But I managed to get away, and now I shall be free to ring up the police from my sister's as soon as—"

She stopped, realizing that her stream of words must seem extraordinary to a stranger.

The house physician looked at her curiously.

"You wrote this note, did you?" he said slowly.

"Yes—yes, I did."

"Then why is it signed John Hughes?" asked the house physician.

Forgetting herself in her shock and agitation, Miss Chandler snatched the paper from his hand. It read, "To the finder of this note, and praying heaven this be not Margery Chandler.

"The above lady, mistakenly thinking me the head of a criminal gang of fire-raisers, has by her action on behalf of the invalid in her care precipitated matters that were in course of coming to a head. Kindly inform immediately the police and/or Mr. Merriman of the Salvo Fire and Accident Insurance Company and Mr. Purvis of Messrs. Hughes and Purvis Solicitors, of the course of events and ask them to withhold action until eight o'clock but not beyond that time. Send Miss Chandler to her sister's house at once. John Hughes."

"I won't go!" cried Margery Chandler; white with the shock of this revealing note.

"Could you tell me what all this is about?" asked the house physician patiently.

"Oh, how could I ever have suspected him?" moaned Margery, as the full extent of her error became clear to her. "How could I be so wickedly, cruelly mistaken as to think he could ever do anything wrong?"

"If you just stopped asking questions and told the doctor what's the matter, we might be able to help you," said the nurse tartly.

But Miss Chandler was not listening to anything but the voice of her remorse, and a fresh agonizing thought had just struck her.

"Oh, my God!" she almost screamed, "I left him there, at the mercy of those fiends!"

She snatched up her gloves and bag, which she had laid on the reception desk, and rushed for the entrance, followed by the house physician, who imagined that he had a mental case to deal with.

Avoiding the porter who was darting from his lodge, and taking the hospital steps in two stupendous and not ungraceful hops, Miss

Chandler reached the street and flung herself at the first taxi in the rank in the middle of it.

"Scotland Yard," she panted.

The driver of the second taxi, who was talking to the first, took his hand off the bonnet.

"Wot you got?" he asked laconically. "Escaped lunatic?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Scotland Yard, she says."

"Well, if she tries any funny business on the way down, you can always give 'er in charge when you reach yer destination, can't yer?"

Some time later Miss Chandler sat, dissolved in tears, beside Detective-Inspector Carter's table. Mr. Purvis sat near her, and Mr. Merriman leaned over her, patting her shoulder. Kain stood behind Merriman and glowered at the distressing exhibition. The clock on the wall said seven fifteen.

"You must not blame yourself so heavily," said Mr. Merriman in a soothing voice. "He has not rung up yet, but that does not necessarily mean that anything has happened to him."

"I took the ambulance away. He was planning to escape in it. They would not have dared touch him with the ambulance men there. I spoilt his plan. I left him at their mercy."

"This Mr. Hughes seems to be a particularly resourceful person," said Inspector Carter kindly. "He will turn up all right, I'm sure."

Miss Chandler raised a tearstained face to the three men.

"If anything happens to him," she said passionately, "I'll never forgive myself. If any harm comes to him it'll kill me, it will indeed."

At the precise moment that Miss Chandler uttered these words, Mr. Hughes's fortunes had reached a very low ebb. For he was securely gagged and bound to a chair in the back room on the top floor of a shop in the Fulham Road. At the other end of the room a pile of rubbish on which paraffin had been poured was arranged in the form of a bonfire, and Paul, assisted by Tukes, was fixing a fuse to the pile. Standish stood beside the helpless solicitor pointing out the beauties of his scheme.

"You have done such good work, Hughes. It is a pity it should all come to nothing. They will not even know it is your body, they will think it is George who has perished in the flames of his own shop. It is fortunate his clothes fit you not too badly. The few fragments they will find will help the identification, and George

can have a few tucks taken in your suit when he arrives abroad. We are flying, did I tell you? When we have seen you on your way. Look!"

He dived in his pocket and produced three strings of jewels that flashed and glittered in his palm.

"We have our money with us in international currency, you see? Equal divisions. We may be separated—who knows?"

The others had finished their work. They came up and received their share of the booty. Paul put his into the inside of his cigarette lighter. Tukes made a tiny hole in the lining of Hughes's coat and dropped his through it. Standish looked at his watch.

"At half past eleven," he said, "we shall light the fuse and wish you goodbye and a speedy journey to eternity."

At Scotland Yard the same people sat in Inspector Carter's room.

"The fact that they have given up the Holborn office suggests that they have decided to go to ground for a bit," said the inspector. "But they are likely to try some final stunt to provide them with the means to stay hidden. The question is what, and where?"

"Probably another fire," suggested Merriman.

"Possibly, though they would hardly dare to claim on it now."

"It would be like Standish's infernal cheek to stage a super fire and get someone else to claim for him."

"I expect Hughes is following them with the same idea in mind," said Purvis.

"I'm sure he isn't," said Miss Chandler. "He wanted to come away in the ambulance. There were several voices in the flat, I heard them."

"So you said before." The inspector considered.

"You think Hughes knew something, or had found out something? But he didn't say anything to you about it?"

"Of course not. He never told me anything at all. That was how I became so mistaken. Oh!" cried Miss Chandler, and stopped speaking with her mouth open.

"Well?"

"It was just before I sent him back to lock up the flat. He said, 'Fulham Road. Don't forget. Fulham Road!'"

"Why the devil didn't you say so before?" snapped the inspector and dialed a number.

A rapid succession of phone calls followed, at the end of which Inspector Carter rose to his feet.

"There is nothing doing in the Fulham Road at the moment, but I shall take a chance on it and go down. You people had better wait here."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the sort," said Miss Chandler. "You can't keep me here, you know you can't."

Mr. Merriman restrained her with a hand on her shoulder.

"My car's outside," he said. "We'll go together."

The clock on the wall said eleven precisely.

The burning fuse crept nearer to the pile.

"Time we went," said Standish. "So long, nosy."

He kicked viciously at Hughes's shin as he passed him. The three men left the room, shutting the door behind them. Their footsteps clattered on the stairs.

The moment they were out of hearing, Hughes, with a violent effort, rocked his chair to and fro. It fell with a crash, and digging his heels into the ground, he pushed himself away from the petrol-soaked heap of rubbish. He was none too soon. He had managed to roll and propel himself into the far corner of the room when the fuse reached the pile. It went up with a roar, and the room was immediately ablaze.

With the force of its igniting, a faggot of blazing wood landed near Hughes and lay burning on the floor. He twisted round, chair and all, and by rolling and wriggling brought his bound arms to the flame and deliberately set them against it to burn through the rope that held him. The process was agonizingly painful, but it was his only chance. He stuck it grimly, wondering if the smoke that was choking him would give him time to succeed.

At last the rope parted and his arms were free. He found a scarf in George's coat and wrapped it about his streaming face. The room was an inferno, the heat blistering his skin, and the smoke scorched his lungs. With a final effort he dragged his legs free and, staggering to the door, pulled it open and plunged into the smoke-filled passage beyond.

The Fulham Road was comparatively empty when the party from Scotland Yard reached it. A few cars and buses, a few passersby hardly disturbed the quiet.

The police car cruised slowly along with an officer standing alert on the runningboard.

"Look!" he cried suddenly.

The car stopped and Carter jumped out. Over the housetops a plume of smoke was rising into the still air. As they watched, a glow appeared beneath it, red and menacing. There was, unmistakably, a house on fire.

As the officer on the runningboard leaped off and dashed to a nearby fire alarm, the police car shot forward to the burning building, and Carter, leaping out, ran up to the door and hammered at it. There was no sound or movement from within.

At the sudden furious knocking on the door of the shop, the three criminals in the back room stood frozen into statues of alarm.

Standish whispered, "Someone's seen the smoke. They'll give the alarm. We must leave by the back. If anyone sees you, pretend to be trying to get in to help."

They moved out of the back room. The door into the shop was open, and from the street beyond came a growing volume of sound. In the distance a fire engine clanged, and then another.

"Jump to it, boys," ordered Standish.

A puff of smoke rolled down the stairs, making them cough. They groped their way towards the back door, but they were too late. A resounding knock upon it threw them into a frightened bunch, clutching at one another, panic-stricken at the way their plan had miscarried.

"Who the hell?" snarled Paul, pulling out his gun.

"Listen, will you?"

Above the clanging of the fire engines, the crackling of the fire, and the cries of the crowd without came unmistakably the voice of authority, shouting orders.

"The busies!" muttered Tukes, licking his dry lips. The smoke was increasing, rolling down the stairs in great clouds. Their eyes watered, they were choking.

Standish made for the stairs. "The next house!" he cried. "Over the roof!"

Paul twisted his handkerchief round his mouth and leaped ahead into the smoke.

"No!" screamed Tukes. "We'll never get past. Three together stand no chance. One alone might, but not three. Burn if you like. I'm through."

He turned back, making for the door of the shop. Standish's hand flashed to his pocket, there was a report, and Tukes lay crumpled halfway to the door.

Paul, on the first landing, heard the shot. He turned back, peer-

ing down the stairs, gun at the ready. Standish stood at the bottom. He had coolly dragged off the dead man's borrowed coat and changed it for his own. He smiled as he felt the jewels in the lining of it. His right hand was behind his back.

"He's gone," he called up to Paul. "Said there was no chance for three going together."

Paul slipped the covering off his mouth.

"Come on then!" he yelled. "What are you waiting for?"

"I agree with Tukes. One alone stands the best chance," answered Standish. Quite deliberately he took aim and fired. Paul swayed, doubled up, and fell forward to the foot of the stairs. Standish put Paul's cigarette lighter in his trouser pocket. Then, wrapping his own and the dead man's handkerchiefs about his face, he began to climb the stairs.

Mr. Hughes, torn, burnt, and exhausted, clinging to the banisters, crawled slowly down towards the first landing. Above and behind him the fire roared more fiercely than ever.

Outside in the street the Fire Brigade got their hoses trained, the escapes raised. Two firemen attacked the door and shattered windows of the shop with hatchets. Close to the escape, within the police cordon, Miss Chandler and her friends stood watching in anxious fear.

"I know he's there. Oh God, I know he's there!" she cried, again and again.

Standish went steadily up, through smoke and increasing heat. Hughes crept painfully down, unaware of his danger. A meeting seemed inevitable. But the fire had done its work, the murderer's own act was his undoing. As the two men came nearer, enveloped in clouds of smoke, there was a tremendous crash. The roof had fallen in upon the top floor.

A shower of debris and burning sparks fell all about them. Hughes with a mighty effort flung himself into the doorway of a room on the first landing and escaped the flaming avalanche, but Standish, holding on to the banisters to guide himself, fared worse. A beam falling down the well of the staircase struck him on the side of the head as it passed. He collapsed on the landing, his legs sprawling over the broken staircase.

Mr. Hughes, not seeing him in the smoke, began to feel his way down the last flight.

* * *

The door and window gave before the firemen's blows. They disappeared into the smoke within. A moment later one of them came out, the limp body of Tukes over his shoulder. He laid him down and gave a cry of alarm and astonishment. The man's back was soaked with blood from a bullet wound that had penetrated to his heart.

"Shot!" the fireman cried incredulously.

"It's Tukes!" screamed Miss Chandler. "I knew John was here! I knew it!"

She gave one wild look round her and before anyone could prevent it plucked off her hat, wound her scarf about her face, and dashed into the burning shop, past the second fireman, who was just emerging with the body of Paul.

Miss Chandler battled her way through the blinding smoke to the foot of the stairs. A figure, its face wrapped about with rags, confronted her. But she was desperate. She had come to save John Hughes or perish in the attempt. She threw herself forward.

But though Miss Chandler did not see that it was Mr. Hughes with whom she struggled, he had recognized her, and determined to remove her from danger. He was not surprised to see her there. In this wild nightmare anything was possible. But Miss Chandler was fresh, and he was very nearly exhausted. She won without difficulty and, going on hands and knees, began to crawl upstairs. Mr. Hughes, exasperated but heroic, followed.

Up and up they crawled, through the smoke, the heat, the water from the hoses, the deafening noise. Up till they reached the landing and the prostrate body of Standish, clad in Hughes's coat that he had taken from Tukes's dead body. Miss Chandler recognized it, and her energy was increased tenfold. She did not bother to inspect the fallen man's swathed head. Her beloved's coat was proof enough. And there was no time to be lost. She began to pull and tug at Standish's legs. Hughes tried to stop her, but she shook him off with flashing eyes. He shrugged his shoulders and gave her what help his failing strength allowed. Together they dragged the murderer out into the street just as the staircase of the shop fell in ruins behind them.

Inspector Carter turned Standish's body over, pulled the handkerchief off his face, and whistled.
"Slick Jim!" he said slowly.

Mr. Hughes, who had fallen beside the murderer, sat up, pulling his scarf off his own face.

"Who?" he asked.

"Slick Jim Harper. Confidence man. North of England, chiefly. Not operated in London for some years, as far as we know. He was seen in Leeds a while back. He's got fat since his last conviction. I didn't know him from Mr. Kain's description."

Miss Chandler, also relieved of her scarf, followed this conversation in horror and amazement. She cried out at the end of it. Mr. Hughes looked up at her with mock severity.

"I thought—I thought," faltered Miss Chandler, "he was you and you were one of them."

"You would," said John Hughes serenely.

She turned and fled. Mr. Hughes sighed and got up, wrapping the handkerchiefs round his blistered wrists. The first-aid men were approaching with a stretcher from the ambulance. He waved them aside, pointing at Standish, and went after Miss Chandler.

He found her with her head in her arms, leaning against the back of a fire engine.

"Margery," said Mr. Hughes. He had to repeat her name before she lifted her head. Then he went on. "Did you go into that burning house to look for me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I made that ghastly mistake. It was my fault they got you. All my fault. I wanted to find you or—die."

"We'll get married quite soon," said Mr. Hughes briskly. "There's no point in waiting, is there?"

"Oh, John!"

Mr. Merriman with Purvis and Kain came crowding about them.

"I do congratulate you," began Merriman most heartily.

Mr. Hughes looked bashful.

"How did you know?" he murmured.

"It was a brilliant piece of work," pursued Merriman. "You brought him out alive. We shall clear the whole case up, and with any luck he'll swing for the murder of Tukes and Paul."

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Mr. Hughes.

He snatched Miss Chandler's hand and pulled her rapidly away. The crowd stared at the two ecstatic beings who burst through their ranks. Hughes stopped a taxi in the road beyond the crowd,

bundled Margery Chandler in, and followed her. They sat looking into one another's smoke-grimed faces.

The taximan turned his head and spoke through his little window.

"Where to?" he inquired.

"The Dorchester," Mr. Hughes answered, adding for Margery's benefit, "to celebrate."

"Where?" asked the driver incredulously.

"The Dorchester. In Park Lane," John Hughes repeated. "Haven't you heard of it?"

The taximan gave his fare a withering look that was entirely wasted on that preoccupied person. Then he put his cab into motion with a jerk that flung the lovers into one another's willing arms.

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The Last Downhill

by Clark Howard

Harlow carried his skis to the base of the lower chair lift and sat down on a bench to put them on.

"Well, Mr. Harlow," said Jerry, the lift operator, "you're almost the last one at the lodge this season. Nearly everyone else has left."

"I'm not *almost* the last," Harlow corrected. "I *am* the last."

"Not quite," said Jerry. "A new guest checked in last night."

Harlow locked on his right ski. "New guest? Who?"

"Don't know. Haven't even seen him. But Mr. Boles called from the desk and said to keep the lift running after you went up; said the new guest would be going up, too."

Harlow stood up and tensed his toes and arch, adjusting the fit. "Did Boles say what the new guest's name was?"

"No, sir. But that looks like him coming now." Jerry bobbed his chin toward the three hundred yard trail that led from the lodge to the lift.

Harlow squinted toward the moving figure. The man's gait looked vaguely familiar—or was he just imagining it? "Kind of unusual for someone to check in

on the last day of the season, isn't it?"

Jerry shrugged. "Skiers are like golfers, Mr. Harlow; sometimes they don't know when to quit. No offense."

Harlow stared at the advancing figure for another few seconds, then said, "Get the lift moving. I'm ready."

He dropped onto the first chair that swung by and settled into it for the ten minute trip up to the first ridge. On the way up, he twisted to look back down at the lone figure moving toward the lift base. He couldn't get it out of his mind that the walk was familiar. Could it possibly be one of them?

Alan?

Pudge?

Leo?

The four of them had grown up on skis. When they were eight and ten, they had easily mastered the junior runs around Moose Head, where they all lived. At twelve and fourteen they were experts on the intermediate slopes. By the time they were sixteen, they were better than most adults and the great high runs from the

unseen summits were as familiar to them as their own bedrooms. Everyone in town talked about how they constantly tried to out do one another, and how they were so equal in skill it was hard to tell them apart on the upper snowfields. Even Pudge, who was twenty pounds overweight, held his own in dexterity and maneuverability with his leaner, trimmer companions.

Pudge was Harlow's cousin; Alan and Leo were not related to them, but the four had grown up closer than brothers, practically inseparable. Over the years they had done everything together: played Pop Warner football and American Legion baseball, built a treehouse, gone to see *Shane* nine times, ridden a freight train down the mountain of Salinas and hitch hiked back, worked the fruit groves during the summer, the ski runs on weekends during the school year. And in everything they were as near equal as possible. Four young colts in a dead heat every time they left the gate.

Then, in their senior year of high school, Harlow pulled ahead of them by just an edge. On the slopes. Alan, Pudge, and Leo noticed it first, then the rest of the town. On the downhill runs, Harlow became just a shade better.

* * *

At the first ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and pushed over to the edge to look down. Back at the base he could see the other man just getting into a chair for the ride up. Even if it was one of them, he thought, what would it matter? He had a ten minute lead and was better than any of them.

He'd been better since they were all seventeen years old. Better all through the decade of their twenties. And their thirties. And now, at forty-one, he was still better. None of them could catch him on the downhill. Especially on the high ones where he could pick up speed and momentum.

He pushed over to the self-operated control box for the middle lift that went up to the second ridge, another fifteen minutes higher. Activating it, he slipped into the first chair across the pad and started his second ascent.

Looking back, he could see that the man coming up on the lower lift had put on a bright red ski cap.

Alan, he thought. Alan had always worn bright red ski caps. Usually ones that Marcy had knitted for him. Marcy was the head cheerleader their last year in high school. Her family had moved to the mountains from Kansas, so she didn't know how to ski. Everybody said she looked

like Debbie Reynolds. She and Alan were steadies. Harlow, Pudge, and Leo were forever trying to get Alan to tell them whether he'd made it with Marcy or not, but Alan would never say. Pudge and Leo did not think he had; Harlow disagreed with them. Harlow was sure Marcy was not a virgin. But he had to wait until two years after they graduated to prove it.

Harlow had stopped in at the drugstore where Marcy worked, the day after Alan left for the army.

"So old Alan is a soldier-boy now," he said, drinking a fountain Coke. "Hup-two-three-four."

"Don't joke about it," Marcy said, wiping off the marble countertop. "I just hope he doesn't get hurt."

"He'll be all right," Harlow assured her. "It's just a police action, not a real war. More like guard duty. Old Alan will come marching home in a couple of years and you two can get married and start making babies." As Marcy bent over the counter, Harlow got a glimpse down her dress. "You know, Marce, Alan and I are best friends. He asked me to look after you while he was gone."

Marcy gave him a dubious look. "Sure he did."

"No, listen, really, I'm serious. He said he wanted to make

sure you didn't just sit around bored all the time. He asked me to take you to a movie now and then. But I've got a better idea than that."

"I'll bet you have."

"Be serious, Marce. You know how Alan was always going to teach you how to ski, but you two never seemed to get around to it? Well, what if I was to teach you while he was away? Wouldn't that be a great surprise for him when he came home?"

Marcy beamed. "Why, that's a wonderful idea!"

"Yeah. You two could really have fun on the slopes together. What do you say?"

She said yes, and that had been the start of it with them.

Harlow took her out every weekend. He patiently worked her on the beginners' run; patiently worked her on the longer intermediate slopes; patiently worked her on the gradual bowls and the easy snowfields; and patiently worked her into bed with him one Saturday night nearly a year after Alan had left.

"God, I'm so ashamed," she said when it was over.

"I don't see why. You've obviously done it before."

"Only with Alan. And we're going to be married."

Harlow took her in his arms. "Come on now. This is 1955. The world is growing up. What you

and I do can't hurt anyone. Alan will never know."

And he probably never would have. Except that Marcy became pregnant. And Harlow arranged for her to go to San Francisco to an abortionist. Abortions were still being done on kitchen tables in 1955. That was where Marcy died: on a kitchen table.

When Alan got back from the army and learned all the details, he swore he'd kill Harlow. But by that time, Harlow had left town.

At the upper ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and turned at once to look back down to the lower ridge. The other man on the lift had reached the lower ridge five minutes before Harlow reached the upper, and Harlow was anxious to see if he was coming any higher. He was not; he was standing next to the control box, one hand on it, looking up at Harlow. I'm fifteen minutes ahead of him now instead of ten, Harlow thought. That had always been very important to Harlow: staying a comfortable distance ahead of other people.

He watched as the figure below kept staring up at him. Then, in a movement that made Harlow involuntarily shiver, the man waved to him. Actually

waved. Raised one hand and gave it a little twist of the wrist.

Just like Pudge used to do. Harlow's mouth went dry as he saw the man activate the middle lift and hop onto a chair to come up.

Pudge? Could it actually be Pudge? Could he have dried out, come back from the depths of alcoholism, got himself in shape again, and gone back to the skis?

Harlow grunted softly. Not that it mattered. Pudge could not catch him anyway. Could not even keep up with him. Never had been able to.

Harlow's father and Pudge's father had been brothers. They and their wives had been killed in a jet crash on the way to Bermuda. A third brother, Harlow and Pudge's Uncle Thomas, had been made their guardian until they came of age. Thomas was a bachelor, in the lumber business back in Michigan. He took their insurance money and made both boys his partners. Pudge went off to college to learn accounting, but Harlow, who had never liked school, went right to work in the lumber mill. He stayed at Uncle Thomas's right side: in the forest, cutting and sawing; on the lakes, sending the wood downstream; at the mill, grading, processing; and by the time Pudge got his degree

and returned, Harlow knew as much about the business as Uncle Thomas did.

"You ought to let me take over for you, Uncle," Harlow told the older man. "Let me do the work. You'll still get your third. What's the matter, don't you think I can do it?"

"You could do it, all right," his uncle said. "But I'd be afraid of the shortcuts you like to take. I've seen you order trees cut that needed another year of growth; seen you grade wood high when it should've been graded low; seen you sell outside our contracts for a kickback. Your ethics need to mature a little, my boy. You need to develop a sense of values beyond immediate profit. I expect it'll be a while before I can let you take over."

Uncle Thomas was an ex-lumberjack and a hard-drinking man. Pudge, Harlow learned, had also developed a taste for hard liquor while at college. Uncle Thomas and Pudge started drinking together. Before long it became a common sight to see the older man and his nephew at a corner table in the big saloon near the mill. Sometimes they could even be seen stumbling out together, arm in arm.

One bitterly cold January night, as Uncle Thomas and Pudge were walking along the dock on their way home, a six-foot log rolled off the top of the

next day's load and knocked them both into the icy lake. Some other customers from the saloon heard their cries and managed to pull Pudge out, but Uncle Thomas got caught under an ice floe and drowned. No one was ever able to figure out how just one log got loose from the chained stack.

After Harlow and Pudge inherited the business, Harlow took over running it while Pudge mostly just kept on drinking. Pudge blamed himself for Uncle Thomas's death, and Harlow did nothing to dissuade him from the notion. The more Pudge stayed drunk, the better Harlow liked it. Eventually Harlow went to court and had Pudge committed to a sanatorium for alcoholics, and Pudge's half of the business put under his guardianship. Harlow heard some years later that Pudge had been convinced by a psychiatrist that he was blameless in Uncle Thomas's death, and Pudge had even subsequently hinted to some friends that he suspected Harlow of letting loose the log that hit them. That kind of talk did not bother Harlow, however. By then he had disposed of the lumber business, absorbed Pudge's share, and moved on to new pastures.

Harlow activated the upper lift and took a chair all the way to the summit of the mountain.

It was a ten minute ride and when he reached the top he looked back and saw the other man just getting off at the second ridge. He was still a good ten minutes ahead of him. As soon as the man—whoever he was—boarded the upper lift and got far enough above the ridge to prevent his jumping out of the chair, Harlow would push off and start down the run. As fast as he was on the downhill, and as familiar as he had become with the slopes during the past three weeks, he would be back on the bottom, at the lodge, packed and in his car, by the time this man—who would have to take it very slowly—got halfway down.

Harlow pushed over to the guard rail and waited. And watched. The man in the red cap stood right where Harlow had stood a few minutes earlier, except that he was looking up instead of down. He made no move to activate the upper lift, which had stopped as soon as Harlow had dropped off at the summit. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, Harlow thought. He was just looking up at Harlow, and looking around at the sky and the terrain, from where he was up to where Harlow was. Okay, sport, take your time, Harlow thought. I can wait it out as long as you can.

Harlow looked at the sky, too.

It was slate blue, solid and clear, with a dazzling high-altitude sun. The temperature, he guessed, was in the mid-twenties, the air thin and exhilarating. It had snowed during the early morning and from the summit it looked as if there was a whole mountain of untracked powder. It was a beautiful sight, one that Harlow would have enjoyed immensely had it not been for the other man down on the ridge.

Looking back down, Harlow's eyes widened as he saw the figure bend and scoop up enough fresh snow for a snowball. The man rolled it over and over, packing it tighter between his mittened hands; then he tossed it up, caught it once, and threw it at a nearby ponderosa. It hit the tree dead center and splattered.

Harlow watched transfixed. It's Leo, he thought. It had to be Leo. A thousand times as a boy he had seen Leo do that exact same thing: make a snowball, toss it up and catch it first, then hit a tree dead center.

When Harlow sold the lumber business, he moved to Minneapolis and became a building contractor. It seemed like the natural thing to do. Several retail lumber dealers who had bought his inferior grades of wood were in Minneapolis, so he

knew who to do business with. He had plenty of capital; all he really needed was a front man. He put in a long distance call to his old boyhood pal, Leo.

"Harlow, where the hell are you?" Leo asked, surprised. "Quite a few people are looking for you: Marcy's two brothers, Alan, Pudge and his lawyers—"

"Never mind who's looking for me, Leo. What are you doing in the way of work these days?"

"Working uptown at Walgreen's. I'm the assistant manager," Leo said proudly.

"A drugstore clerk!" Harlow scoffed.

"It's not a bad job," Leo said defensively. "Got some nice fringe benefits."

"Yeah, free razor blades. Listen, Leo, how would you like to make some serious money? I'm about to go into a new business where I really don't know anybody. I need a right-hand man, somebody I can trust. Are you interested?"

"Is it legal?"

"Of course it's legal," Harlow said, trying to sound indignant.

Leo was interested. Harlow swore him to secrecy, then told him where he was. He sent Leo enough money for him and his family to leave town quietly. After Leo joined Harlow in Minneapolis, they established Prestige Homes and started purchasing land. Soon they be-

gan to erect a tract of townhouses in the seventy-five thousand dollar range.

"You're the organized one, Leo, so I'm putting you in charge of running the general office," Harlow told him. "I'm going to be out in the field supervising the construction, ordering materials, and that sort of thing. I'll also be doing the selling and promoting, so I won't have any time for paperwork. You handle the money for us; I'll pass invoices on to you and you can see that they get paid."

Leo was gratified at his responsible position. He was also impressed with the expertise Harlow showed in establishing the business, acquiring the land and building permits, subcontracting the surveying and all the necessary craftsmen, and personally ordering the lumber and all the other materials needed. It pleased him to see how much everyone liked Harlow, and how well he treated all the people associated with Prestige Homes. Leo began to think that the people back home who spoke badly of Harlow were very much mistaken about him.

"I was as leery of this move as you were at first," he told his wife after they had been in Minneapolis a month, "but now I think it's going to work out just fine. Can you believe Harlow's paying me *three* times what I

was getting at the drugstore? I really don't mind buying my razor blades at all!"

Business boomed. People bought the townhouses as fast as the bank would approve their loans. Within four months the first ones were completed, the city safety inspector approved them for occupancy, and families began to move in.

At every opportunity, Harlow praised Leo for his work. "Bringing you into this business was the smartest move I ever made," he said with a pat on the back. "The way you've run this office has been more help than you can imagine. I've been able to devote my time to the building and selling without a single worry about the office procedure and the paperwork. Speaking of paperwork, incidentally, we topped off six more units yesterday. Sign these certificates of completion for me, will you?"

Leo was so accustomed by then to signing reams of paper every week that he did it without a second thought. The certificates of completion were statements attesting that all top-grade materials had been used in the construction of the townhouses: top-grade lumber, cement mix, wiring, and plumbing. The certificates were filed with the city safety office when a final safety inspection was requested. The final inspection

was a cursory one: carpets laid properly, heating apparatus vented properly, electrical outlets capped—that sort of thing. The important inspections were supposed to have been done during construction, when the inspector could see the cement mix, the wiring, the pipes—and the lumber. But the inspector who conducted those inspections was driving a new car, a gift from Harlow.

Sometimes inferior materials in a home go undetected for years. Second-grade lumber, for instance, might take a decade to deteriorate, and then present no more serious a problem than some minor refurbishing. But in the case of the Prestige Homes townhouses, the builder—and one buyer—were not so lucky. Thirty-seven days after the Lemmer family moved into Unit Number 268, the landing between the first and second floors collapsed and killed Mr. Lemmer.

It was the biggest building scandal to hit Minneapolis in years. Construction was ordered suspended at once. State investigators arrived to inspect some still unfinished units. Samples of the low-grade lumber being used were impounded. The city inspector who had approved for occupancy the Lemmer dwelling was suspended. Harlow and Leo

were both indicted by a grand jury.

At the subsequent trial it was shown by Harlow's attorney that at no time had he ever put his signature on any document connected with Prestige—not an order, an invoice, a check, a sub-contract, a sales contract, or (most important) a certificate of completion. It had all been Leo, right down the line. Leo had signed the order for low-grade lumber; Leo had paid for it; and Leo had signed the certificate attesting that *high-grade* lumber had been used in the Lemmer townhouse. Clearly, Leo was the culprit.

Harlow was acquitted. Leo got eight years.

So now Leo's back, Harlow thought, looking down from the summit of the ski run. The man in the red cap was still on the middle ridge, looking up at him. Harlow grunted softly. It was obvious to him what Leo planned to do. Wait on the middle ridge until Harlow started his downhill run, then push off the ridge and intercept him somewhere halfway down the mountain. Clever. But not clever enough.

Or was it? Harlow looked behind him, past the back side of the mountain. On the horizon, clearly visible, was a line of black that looked like dirty fumes from an exhaust.

A storm.

Damn, Harlow thought. One of those early spring snowstorms that came out of nowhere. Very cold, very quiet, little or no wind. He could not tell how fast it was moving—but surely it would be over the run to the lodge within an hour.

He looked back down at Leo. Or was it Pudge? No, it was Leo. The waiting game was definitely on Leo's side: he could simply stay on the ridge until the storm forced Harlow to make a downhill run.

Harlow wet his dry, cold lips. Pushing over, he looked down the back side of the mountain. He saw a long, easy run down a gently sloping bowl that dropped about a thousand feet to a tree line. Beyond that, although he could not see it, was probably another run, perhaps two or three, the rest of the way down. At the bottom would be the highway, going around the base of the mountain to the lodge. Harlow smiled. Suppose he were to ski down the back side before Pudge—Leo, that is—even knew he was off the summit? Once he made it to the highway, it would be easy to pick up a ride around to the lodge. Leo would think he was still up on the summit. And by the time he became suspicious enough to ride the upper lift to the top to see for himself, Har-

low could be back at the lodge and on the road.

Harlow again looked across the sky where the storm was brewing. Definitely moving this way, he told himself. Got to decide one way or another.

He pushed back to the summit rail and looked down at the ridge again. The red cap was still clearly visible, not moving.

Okay, Harlow made up his mind, the back side it is then. He stood at the rail for several moments, long enough to be seen. Then he pushed away, buttoned the collar of his ski jacket, and put his mittens back on. After staying out of sight for five minutes, he moved back to the rail and let himself be seen again. By then he was sure that Leo was used to his disappearing for several minutes at a time.

So long, chump, he thought as he pushed away for the last time. He slid quickly to the back lip of the summit, paused just seconds to put his goggles in place and close his face flap, and pushed skillfully over the edge.

The entire back side of the mountain was an uninterrupted sheet of untracked powder, the top few inches still loose from its early-morning fall. As Harlow made his run, high, billowing plumes of snow curled up in his wake. It was a magnificent run, one of the best of his life. It had

been a long time since he had felt such elation.

At the bottom of the run, near the first tree line, he turned into a smooth, professional halt and looked around. He was on a flat meadow, or maybe a frozen pond, about a fourth of the way down. There was no other run in sight. Beyond the stand of trees, he thought: that's where it's likely to be. He pushed forward across the level ground, toward the trees. Before he got to them, his shadow suddenly vanished from in front of him. Looking up, he saw that the first small dark clouds of the storm had arrived; one of them had blotted out the sun.

Pushing onward, he reached the trees, zigzagged through them—finding that they were very shallow—and cleared them on the other side. And there was the next run, a shorter one, leading down to the next lower ridge. Just as he started to push off, a glimpse of color caught his attention. He looked up at one of the ridges above the trees—and saw a figure in a red cap cutting down a narrow, twisting run like a professional. What the hell—? That couldn't be Leo, he thought. Or Pudge. Neither of them had ever developed lower leg movements that good. He frowned deeply. Alan? Had it been Alan all along? Of course, the red ski cap—

Without further thought, Harlow went over the side. It was an easy run, high but not steep, not long enough to make him winded. Halfway down he ran into snow; large, wet flakes, drifting straight down. When he reached the next ridge, he was immediately aware that it was becoming noticeably colder. He glided into a brace of sapling pines and moved under their umbrella boughs to rest.

But he did not rest long. Above him, still moving swiftly toward him, was Leo. Or rather, Alan.

Harlow pushed off the ridge onto the next run. It was longer than the second one, but still not as long as the first. As he plunged downward, he became aware that the sun was completely blocked out now, with only the gray daylight left; and the falling snow was thickening around him like a white curtain. Halfway down the run, the snow became so heavy that for most of a minute he was actually skiing blind. He had never done that before; it gave him an eerie feeling.

He was in a half-crouch, leaning to his right, when he hit the tree. It caught him between the shoulder and elbow, and spun him all the way around, knocking him flat. There was a sharp *craaaack!* sound and for a terrible, frightening moment he was afraid one of his skis had

broken. Ignoring his throbbing arm, he pushed himself erect and threw his goggles up to examine the skis. They were both all right. He swallowed dryly; thank God.

He looked around. He was on a level ridge trail that wound through a thick stand of ponderosas, very tall ponderosas, close to fifty feet, he estimated. Blocked by the high branches, the snow was not falling as heavily where he stood. It was as if he were in a huge, silent tent, absolutely white except for the poker-straight trees that held up its roof. His eyes were watering. Pulling off one mitten, he wiped them with his fingers. As he put the mitten back on, he saw the red ski cap again.

It was coming toward him through the trees, a slowly moving spot of color in a sea of pure white. He sucked in his breath. Alan? Pudge? Leo? Who the hell was it? But, he thought, it made no difference who it was. No difference at all. He had to escape from whoever it was. He had to run.

He looked down at the ground. The falling snow, even as light as it was in the trees, had already covered up his tracks and his ski poles, which were still on the ground. If he moved now, he would make fresh tracks and could be followed. But if he

stayed where he was, if he hid...

Next to where Harlow stood, there was a twelve-foot drift banked up against a tall ponderosa. He unlocked his skis and knelt beside the drift. He tried to dig with both hands but his right arm was too sore to move it, so he used his left hand only, scooping out a cave in the drift. When he had dug it large enough to squeeze into, he turned and sat back in it, knees drawn up in front of him. He glanced at his skis; they were almost covered with fresh snow. And the newly falling flakes were beginning to cover him also, camouflaging him in his cave.

Squinting. Harlow searched for the red ski cap. He saw it: off to the left at about ten o'clock, some fifteen yards away. It was impossible, because of the falling snow, to see any more of the figure; just the bright red cap. With maddening slowness, it moved across in front of him. Ten o'clock, twelve o'clock, two o'clock. Then it disappeared into the whiteness. Harlow chuckled to himself. Fool.

His right arm was throbbing and he carefully touched it. Through the ski jacket he could feel massive swelling. So that was what the cracking sound had been: his arm.

He blinked his eyelids, which were becoming heavy with snow.

He wanted to get up and get back on his skis, but somehow he could not manage it. With his left hand he reached out of the cave and stuck his mittened fingers into the fresh layer of snow. There were about three inches of it, which meant it was falling at the rate of nine or ten inches an hour. That discovery, and the sensation that he was growing very warm, made him realize suddenly that he had to get out; he had to have help.

"Alan!" he yelled.

No answer.

"Pudge!"

No answer.

"Leo!"

No answer.

He called their names over and over for half an hour.

Then the white world became silent again.

In the coffee shop at the lodge, Collins, the mountain ranger, tossed his red ski cap on the counter and warmed his hands around a mug of steaming chocolate.

"Anything from the highway crew?" Boles asked him.

"Nothing," Collins replied. "He didn't make it down, I'm afraid." He sighed heavily. "Damn! I came so close to catching him. You know, I thought it was my imagination when I first saw the guy. In all the years I've been coming down from the

lookout cabin on those back slopes, that's the first time I ever saw another skier. Was he the only one up there today?"

"No, that fellow at the front table went up, too. Only to the second ridge, though. He had intended going all the way to the summit but he hadn't been on skis for a while. After giving it some thought, he came on down the two lower runs."

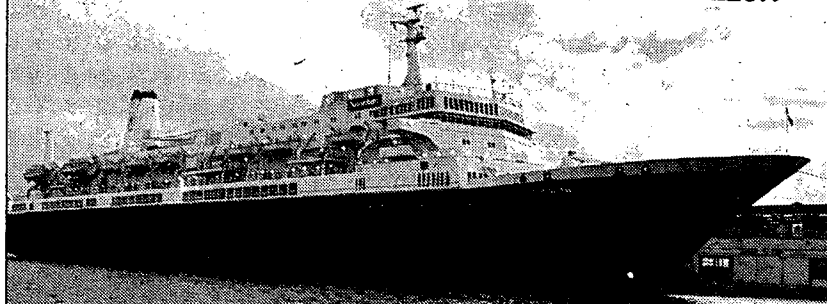
"Smart," said Collins. He glanced at the man, at the ordinary red ski cap similar to his own lying next to the man's plate. "Who is he, anyway?"

The lodge manager shrugged. "Just a salesman. Name's Phil Casey. Car threw a rod. It's laid up in Hickey's Garage; he sent to Sacramento for a part. Said he thought as long as he was stranded, he might as well get in a little skiing. Only got to do the one downhill run, though, before the storm hit. Tough luck."

"Better luck than the other fellow had," Collins commented.

He wondered if the other skier had frozen to death yet, and sipped at his steaming chocolate.

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Warning: This House Protected

by Pamela Schossau

The first meeting of the Garden Park Neighborhood Protection League was held one Thursday evening. It was two days after Mr. Teece had lost his VCR and two teeth in an encounter with a burglar on his back porch.

Mr. Teece stood before them now, red with indignation except for a jaw the color of old grapejuice stains. He sported a gap in his teeth that made a whistling sound whenever he tried to say a word with an "s" sound in it.

"I'll tell you, folks (whistle), I'm mad! That creep came into my house (whistle) and hit me with my VCR, and got away . . . and the police say it'll be a cold day before I get my VCR back—"

The blue-uniformed officer standing next to him flushed. "I think what we said was it would be difficult—"

"And you all know what that means." Mr. Teece glared at his audience. "So we need to protect ourselves from the scum that come in here . . ."

And so on. The gist of Teece's plan was to arm the members of the neighborhood so they could rove the streets, summarily executing anyone who looked so much as ill-mannered. The officer, however, countered with a proposal for measures less likely to result in twenty to thirty at the Big Flats Penitentiary, such as improving the lighting.

Although Mr. Teece was not without his following among the neighbors, who regarded his bruises and dental irregularities with real anxiety, cooler heads prevailed. The Protection League left the Garden Park Elementary School that night armed only with a firm resolve to make the changes to their homes the officer had recommended.

This did not sit well with Mr. Teece.

"At least iron security grilles," he whistled with wounded petulance as they all shuffled through the door into the Garden Park evening. "Yes. And a motion-detection system."

"I don't know." Mr. Higgley, who shared a driveway and part of

a cedar fence with Mr. Teece, shook his head soberly. "I don't want to live in some kind of fortress."

"But you can see what they've already done!" cried Mr. Teece. "We have to use anything we can to stop them!"

Mr. Higgley blinked his round, serious eyes and looked at his wife, who smiled.

"Poor Mr. Teece," was all he said. She, smiling, nodded her agreement.

Poor Mr. Teece.

Poor Mrs. Brineyman.

At the second meeting of the Garden Park Neighborhood Protection League, this forlorn lady stood before them, weeping and wringing her hands over her grandmother's silver service and a toaster oven.

Mr. Teece jerked one beefy thumb toward her.

"I told you," he said, with a satisfaction that might have disturbed poor Mrs. Brineyman, had she been aware of it in her moment of distress. "We have to get them *first*."

But, again, the cautious reasoning of the attending police officer prevailed.

"Well—" concluded Mr. Teece, speaking to his neighbors, the Higgleys, as they emerged into the elementary school parking lot. "I'm getting a gun."

Mr. Higgley pursed his lips with the thoughtful and serious air of a monk pondering the route to heaven. He said carefully, "You have to do what seems right."

Mr. Teece gave his neighbor a dark look. "Still not convinced, eh?"

And Mr. Higgley shrugged his small, round shoulders, while Mrs. Higgley smiled.

It was the following Saturday that Mr. Teece called across his driveway to the Higgleys, who were just walking up the steps of their front porch.

"Westfellows," he proclaimed loudly, "lost their microwave and two portable radios."

To Mr. Teece's gratification, this news seemed to distress his neighbors. Mr. Higgley blinked several times, and Mrs. Higgley's smile faded a bit.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Higgley, slowly, "we need to do something to protect our house." Thus chastened, they continued up the steps and through the front door.

Mr. Teece waited with interest to see what sort of changes might occur on the tidy exterior of his neighbors' broad-porched, low-roofed old house. But nothing of any consequence seemed to change—beyond, that is, the addition of a patch of peonies to the flowery populace of the front yard. Meanwhile, Mr. Teece went forward with his own fortification.

A week or so later, on a sunny afternoon, Mr. Teece stood near the street before his house to regard the first of the work by the security grille people. The result appeared much like a high-security mausoleum. As he surveyed this gratifying new look, Mr. Teece became aware of the Higgleys at work in their yard.

Mr. Higgle was tapping into the ground a small, neat sign that was tastefully framed with wrought-iron curlicues. At the same time, Mrs. Higgle was planting brilliant orange zinnias around its base.

Mr. Teece walked out into the street a short way until he could read the sign:

"WARNING;" it said in gracious, looping letters. "THIS HOUSE PROTECTED BY SPIRITS."

Mr. Teece nodded his head and was about to say, "An electronic system, eh?" Then he stopped and read the sign again.

"Now, see here, Higgley," Mr. Teece said with annoyance. "You're not taking this seriously."

Mr. Higgle blinked up at him, then straightened and carefully brushed his hands off. He did this delicately, as if there were cotton candy stuck to his fingers. Then, visibly anxious to understand what was giving offense, he went out into the street to join his neighbor.

"Don't you think it's big enough?" he asked.

Mr. Teece laughed a short bark of a laugh. "Big enough! Are you crazy?"

Mr. Higgle seemed troubled. "I'm afraid I don't understand—is the sign a problem?"

"Come on, Higgley. What's all this about spirits?"

Mr. Higgle exchanged a look with his wife, who glanced up from patting soft dirt around the zinnias.

"We decided to take your suggestion."

"But you can't believe that saying your house is haunted will keep all the burglars away."

Mr. Higgle considered this. "Well, no . . . perhaps not . . . it just seemed fair to give some sort of warning . . ."

"About what?!"

"Well, about what the spirits might do . . ."

Mr. Teece stalked off down his driveway with an air of someone sorely offended, leaving the Higgleys gazing after him.

A day or so passed, during which the mere sight of the Higgley house irritated Mr. Teece. For them to respond to so serious a danger with so juvenile a prank was most distressing.

At least, he hoped it was a prank. They couldn't seriously *believe* in spirits, could they? He had a vague idea that Higgley was some kind of electronics expert, employed at a manufacturing plant on the north side. While Mr. Teece didn't know very much about either electronics or—what was it called? "para" something or other—he felt intuitively that a person knowledgeable about the one could not be suckered into the other.

Then it occurred to Mr. Teece that, since there were those in the world who *did* believe in that kind of thing, living next door to a house labeled as haunted would hardly be good for property values. He was so bothered by this that he started working himself up to a confrontation with the Higgleys.

But then came the night when ghostly blue and red lights pulsed through the Venetian blinds at the front windows of Mr. Teece's house. Peering out, he saw a police car pulled carelessly up to the curb, almost in front of that miserable little sign.

Wearing his robe and a pair of untied sneakers that flapped noisily, Mr. Teece ran outside. He stood open-mouthed in his driveway and watched as the police led a sobbing young man out of the Higgleys' front door, down the steps, and across the lawn to the patrol car.

"What is it? What's happened?" he cried when Mr. Higgley appeared briefly at the door.

"Burglar," Mr. Higgley called back. "But it's all right. They got him."

Mr. Teece pondered this mysterious event all the next day. For the first time, he was forced to consider that the Higgleys might have done more than just put a sign in their yard.

It was preposterous, of course; broadminded as he was, Mr. Teece was certain of that. But, on a practical level (for Mr. Teece considered himself highly practical as well as broadminded), he decided that he had to look at the evidence, and consider that perhaps the Higgleys were the only ones to have found a truly effective method for protecting their property.

He was still ruminating on the matter when he turned on the six o'clock news and saw Mr. Higgleys face shining roundly from the TV screen.

"Well," said Mr. Higgleys, blinking at the reporter with great earnestness, "I just woke up and found him at the front door, banging on it with his fists and begging to be let out."

"Inside your front door," the reporter clarified, pushing her microphone closer to Mr. Higgleys mouth. "Begging to be let out?"

"That's right."

"And could that have anything to do with this sign of yours?"

Here the television showed a closeup of Mr. Higgleys sign, with Mrs. Higgleys flowers glowing colorfully all around it. The camera zoomed in close on the word "spirits."

"Exactly what does the sign mean, Mr. Higgleys, by 'spirits'?"

Mr. Higgleys brow wrinkled. "I—er, think everyone knows what spirits are."

"You mean supernatural beings, like ghosts, demons—maybe fairies?"

To Mr. Teece's astonishment, Mr. Higgleys actually *smiled*. To be sure, it was a most grave and thoughtful smile, even an enigmatic smile. Mr. Higgleys said, from behind his smile, "I suppose you could call them that."

The reporter looked directly at the camera for a split second in a deadpan, we-all-know-about-people-like-this, silent commentary. Then, smiling a cheerful smile at Mr. Higgleys, she asked, "And what do you think these spirits did to William Cade, the alleged burglar?"

Mr. Higgleys thought about this question long enough that the reporter grew visibly uncomfortable. Then he answered with an equivocal, "People are afraid of funny things." And his mouth shut firmly.

The reporter wisely took that as a hint to move on to other things. "Well, whatever it was, it was certainly effective."

"It was my wife's idea," said Mr. Higgleys modestly, leaning to follow the microphone as the reporter edged away.

"You heard it here," the reporter beamed at the camera. "At the site of Garden Park's first spiritual home security system, this is Theresa Diamond, News Four."

That clinched it. Before Mr. Teece could lose either nerve or resolve, he strode across the Higgleys' lawn, bounded up the steps, and rapped sharply on the white-painted front door.

Mr. Higgley was wiping his mouth with a paper napkin when he appeared.

Mr. Teece said, "Higgley, it's about your spirits."

"Yes?" Mr. Higgley blinked.

"I want to talk to you about them."

"Yes?"

"May I come in?" Mr. Teece put his hand flat against the surface of the open door.

Mr. Higgley looked doubtful, but stepped back to allow his neighbor to enter.

Inside, Mr. Teece stopped for a moment to evaluate the environment. The air smelled of pork and cooked carrots, nothing more—or less—substantial. The rooms he could see looked natural enough, being crowded with comfortably unfashionable furniture and, everywhere, great quantities of what looked to be electronic gadgetry and tools. There was no noticeable sensation of any kind in the surrounding space, no vibration or tingling or chill.

"Are they only here at night, then?" he queried, his voice hopeful as his gaze roved down the hall toward the well-lit kitchen.

Mr. Higgley's look at him was puzzled. "Here—oh, you mean the spirits?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, in a way . . ."

"And you have no problem with them?"

"No, no problem . . ."

"Then I want to buy one from you."

"Buy one?" Mr. Higgley echoed in befuddlement.

Mrs. Higgley appeared in the hall, smiling quizzically.

"Yes," Mr. Teece snapped. "Buy one of the spirits that scared the burglar off. If you can live with them, so can I—as long as they'll keep my house safe."

Mr. Higgley looked still more doubtful.

"Now see here, Higgley." Mr. Teece abandoned his search for clues of supernatural inhabitants and turned sharply to face the man. "If you have a way to protect our property and our lives, you can't keep it to yourself."

"I don't—"

Mr. Teece wheedled, "Do it because we're neighbors. We have to stick together, you know."

Mr. Higgley glanced uneasily at his wife. Then, with a resigned sigh, he gestured at the living room. "That's one."

Mr. Teece peered into the room. "Where?"

"On the table there."

Cautiously, Mr. Teece crossed the room to get a better look. On a small table was a box with a fountain of long fibers sprouting upward from its center. These fibers bent gracefully in arcs and waved in a synchronously swaying dance when the air around them moved. Mr. Teece had noticed the thing during his scan, but had passed it off as the kind of tacky gimmick-art that people like the Higgleys went in for.

"This?" he said, with relief. Better and better; it looked safe enough.

Mr. Higgley went to the box and reached in back to push a switch. He stepped away.

Nothing happened. After a moment, Mr. Teece noticed the sensation of his nerves stretching taut, but this was probably just from waiting. He looked from one to the other of his neighbors, then back at the box. He was about to speak when, out of the silence, there came a whispered sound.

He squinted at the box. The whisper breathed the question, "Crazy?"

The whisper, like any whisper without a source, raised bumps on Mr. Teece's arms.

"Fool . . . ghost . . . where . . . where?" it asked.

Mr. Teece peered first at Mr. Higgley's mouth, then at Mrs. Higgley's. Their lips weren't moving. He stared at the box, expecting more, but Mr. Higgley reached out to push the switch again.

"There are too many of us here," he said. "It's better when there's only one."

A shy spirit, Mr. Teece decided, feeling at the same time relieved and surprisingly disappointed.

"Is that all it does? Talk?"

Mr. Higgley had an air of apology. "That's all."

Mr. Teece frowned at the box. Disappointing, yes. Still, he had a clear image in mind of William Cade sobbing as the police led him away, and of Mr. Higgley himself saying to the reporter, "People are afraid of funny things."

He took a breath and asked, "How much do you want?"

It took several blinks before Mr. Higgley could reply, "I think you should try them first."

That was a comforting idea: free trial, no deposit, no interest. "But you'll sell me one if I want it?"

"As many as you need."

"More than one?"

"Why, one for each room."

Shy, short-ranged spirits. Well, maybe that was even better. Yes, I can live with ghosts, thought Mr. Teece with satisfaction. Aloud he agreed, "Let me try them first."

And so, a few minutes later, Mr. Teece was walking back down the steps and across the drive, carrying in his arms a large box stamped "24 rolls/2-ply." From the top of the box could be seen a forest of wavering fiber tips.

"Don't forget," called Mr. Higgley from his front door. "Don't put any in the room where you sleep."

"Yes, yes," agreed Mr. Teece as he walked. There had never been any question about that.

In the hours before bedtime, Mr. Teece fiddled with the boxes and their placement, being careful not to engage any of the switches before the time came.

"If Higgley can live with it, so can I," he murmured to himself as he watched the dancing fibers suspiciously from across his living room.

At bedtime, Mr. Teece wandered about the house in his pajamas, gingerly turning on all the boxes.

As had become his habit recently, Mr. Teece was startled awake by the merest hint of a sound. He turned fearfully toward the bedroom window, thinking instantly of the remote-control twenty-two-inch television that had survived the first invasion and still occupied his living room like a throne.

Somewhere in the house, board creaked against board. Mr. Teece sprang from bed. Standing barefoot and tense next to the bed, he took a breath and forced himself to relax. It was just a natural sound, certainly; the sighing of an old house in its sleep.

But if it weren't—if it weren't . . .

Abruptly, he realized that the real source of danger might be what he himself had brought into his house.

He padded to his bedroom door, out into the hall. The faint gray illumination from a street light lay innocently in rectangles on the floor. He proceeded down the hallway and into the dining room, all the while looking uneasily at the motions of tree shadows against the windows.

Somewhere, a voice whispered, "Is someone there?"

Mr. Teece froze. Fear seized him by the throat, strangling a swallow.

Then, "Yes!" the whisper hissed, creeping into his ears, making the tiny hairs within quiver. "Someone there!"

In that brief moment when Mr. Teece recognized the sound, all thoughts of burglary evaporated. He leaped away from that vulnerable place, there in the middle of the room, stumbled over a chair leg, and staggered into a space against the wall.

The whisper, coming from everywhere and filling all space with its ghastly breath, queried, "Hide? Hide? *Hide?*!"

This astonished Mr. Teece. Did the ghosts want to hide? Were they afraid of him?

The notion recalled a tiny bit of Mr. Teece's courage from beneath the terror. Was there a chance he could chase the things away? After all, he didn't intend to give up his property to *any* kind of fiend, be it man or . . . or . . .

"Devil . . ." the whisper provided, with just a hint of malicious cheer in its tone.

Calmly, now, Mr. Teece told himself, panting. What kind of weapon would one use on a ghost, anyway? Oh, if he'd only bought a gun like he had said he would. Surely even a ghost wouldn't want its stuff riddled by lead. But there was no gun; he'd have to find something else. He glanced frantically around the darkened room . . .

"Hit beat *kill* him?" the whisper breathed hopefully. *

Mr. Teece pushed his back against the wall and pressed his lips hard together to prevent a groan of despair. Despite his ignorance of the spirit world, he had no trouble at all believing that a ghost could beat him to a bloody, unrecognizable pulp. It would be a bad end, to be found dead on his dining room floor—killed by a demon he personally had invited into his home. The humiliation of it, after he'd done his civic duty, inciting his neighbors to defend themselves, that he should be lost to . . . to . . .

"Ghosts in a box," the whisper said. "Box never hold ghost . . . stop ghost . . ."

This time Mr. Teece groaned aloud, a wavering lament that came strangely from his own throat like the sound of a dying animal. In desperation, he leaped out into the middle of the room, arms stretched menacingly, legs wide apart in a powerful stance that would surely be frightening even to a ghost, and snarled a most savage and vicious snarl. But his legs were rubbery with fear, so

he staggered and almost fell; and the snarl came out like the gagging of a sick man.

"Do it now?!" came the horrible whisper.

Having exposed his position, Mr. Teece searched wild-eyed and helpless around the dark interior of the room, wishing desperately that he could see *something*, yet very certain turning on the lights would be suicidal. Perhaps the icy fear tromping with cold feet up and down his spine would be less if it actually *had* been a burglar. Yes, a burglar was nothing compared to this—a burglar could be hit, smashed. A burglar would—

"Bleed . . . spill blood and brains . . ."

Whimpering, Mr. Teece rushed through the doorway to the kitchen, where he snatched open a utensil drawer. But he pulled too hard, and the utensils crashed onto the floor and his bare feet, while the drawer itself swung down to bang hard against his shins. He howled.

Feeling blindly among the scattered utensils for an appropriately deadly one, Mr. Teece cursed the Higgleys with every fiber of his being. No, no problem, Higgley had said. Had Higgley believed they could actually be imprisoned in a little box? Had he really given them away not knowing that his neighbor would be sacrificed to their unearthly . . .

And, from mere inches away, "Want soul," the whisper hissed. "Suck soul . . ."

At that moment, all thoughts of property and an owner's rights gave way under a deafening landslide of terror. The awful command, "Run, run, run!" became a sigh that followed the moaning Mr. Teece as he raced, bare feet slapping against the floor, trailing spoons and steak knives behind him, to the door and out into the night.

Mrs. Higgley was planting snapdragons in the little space between the shrubs and the front steps. Mr. Higgley sat on these same sun-warmed steps, his attention riveted on a magazine.

Neither was aware of Mr. Teece until he spoke from the middle of his drive.

"I don't want them," he said, too loudly. His voice quavered a little.

Mr. Higgley looked up at his rumped, pajama-clad neighbor with a mildly astonished expression, his round mouth making an "o" in his round face.

"Come and take them away. Get them out of my house." Mr. Teece's eyes were bleary with fatigue; his back ached. "I'm getting an electronic sentry system. That's *all* I need."

"Didn't they work?" asked Mr. Higgley anxiously.

"Oh, they worked." Mr. Teece stared at the Higgleys with a most peculiar expression. "Just get them out of my house!" And he turned and stalked away.

Mr. Higgley, blinking in the sunlight, looked after his neighbor for a long moment. Then he glanced at his wife, puzzled, and said, "But they *did* work."

Mrs. Higgley nodded, smiled broadly, and returned to planting her snapdragons.

UNSOLVED

by
Ken Weber

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Five years of legal wrangling over the estate of the late Ms. Freda B. Ogden had almost been resolved when four extremely valuable paintings were stolen from her private gallery. The late Ms. Ogden had been a devotee, not to mention a considerable expert, on the Italian Renaissance. She had also been an ardent feminist, a publicly declared spinster, and the last in the direct line of Ogdens, whose fortune had been amassing without pause since the War of 1812.

A perceptive ancestor with a head for chemistry and a nose for marketing had determined the public's desire for a mild blend of whisky that warmed the stomach without simultaneously blinding the eyes. The result was wealth that, by the turn of the century, was literally beyond counting.

Freda B. Ogden had managed the distilleries, extended the art collection, and stamped on opposing points of view with a rigor matched only by the original Ogden himself. When she died five years ago, the distillery business was healthier than it had ever been, all the other enterprises had doubled in value, and, through some exceptionally judicious trading and buying, she had elevated the family's collection of Renaissance paintings to a level that was matched only by a very few international galleries.

The estate was in the hands of Monopoly Trust Inc., and was about to be dispersed among twenty-three squabbling second cousins, when the paintings disappeared.

Monopoly Trust's agent, Wendy Pickell, who, to her considerable surprise, had been dealing quite amicably with twenty-three different lawyers, had suddenly found herself in an impossible imbroglio over the theft. In fact she was slowly becoming convinced that the Ogden estate would never be settled until long after her own was forgotten! Then, as though the case were compounding itself with complete reverses, the paintings turned up again. Only two weeks ago an anonymous telephone call had led the RCMP to an unused barn not far from one of the Ogden mink ranches in northern Alberta. No one was more relieved at their discovery than Wendy.

The first thing she had done was to inspect the paintings herself

at the RCMP office in Edmonton. As soon as she arrived, Wendy had noted how carefully the thieves had crated and preserved them. Someone, she had remarked, had shown as much care as Freda B. Ogden would have done. A good thing, for these were priceless works.

Two of the pieces, in fact, were not paintings at all, but sketches, one attributed to Donatello, a preliminary musing for his statue of David; another was a wonderfully fleshy set of nudes in a pastoral scene by Giotto. The latter was especially valuable because the painting, which had eventually followed the sketch, had been lost for several hundred years. The third was an anonymous, early fourteenth century Garden of Eden scene, with Adam, Eve, God the Father, and an incredibly long snake, all gathered together in mild surprise under an apple tree. Its considerable value was due to its age and uniqueness rather than in any artistic or innovative quality. Giorgione's *Rêve Champêtre* was the fourth and perhaps the most valuable. It was not even a part of the Ogden collection, but was on exchange from The Louvre at the time of the theft.

Wendy's relief at their undamaged condition was rather sharply modified when she was finally able to take a closer look. Someone—someone with a reasonable degree of artistic ability—had drawn very tiny but quite discernible raisins in the navel of every nude body in all four pieces! The shy maiden in the Giorgione had a lumped cluster of them in hers. Adam and Eve sported very small, black ones, and on the Donatello *David* the artist had arranged them in a small circle.

Vandalism?—perhaps. Mischief?—possibly. A deliberate devaluing of the paintings? A red herring? It was almost certain that the anonymous telephone call to the RCMP about the unused barn had come from someone associated with the raisins. Whatever the motive, Monopoly Trust had been forced to bring in yet another consultant on the Ogden case, causing even further delay. Nothing regarding the disposition of the estate could even be contemplated until an authority had decided whether the paintings could be restored or repaired or whether they had lost value.

It was this authority in the person of one Mark Dixel that Wendy had been patiently watching all morning, as he hunkered before the artworks in the RCMP storage room in Edmonton. Dixel had clumped in carrying two briefcases, a small one from which he emptied several magnifying glasses, some small brushes, an assortment of cloths, two flashlights, and a single white glove. The large case—Wendy had to look several times to be sure—was filled with bags of potato chips!

"Don't like the feel of them on my hands," Dexel had said, nodding at the chips as he put on the one white glove. And that had been the extent of his remarks to her. The rest of the time he had spent talking to the paintings and eating chips with his gloved hand. Wendy caught pieces of the monologue from where she sat.

"Raisins . . . no imagination . . . never did like the green ones . . . soluble . . . beautiful work, Giotto . . . okay . . . should be . . ."

Through the past two hours, and seven bags of chips, Dexel had peered at, brushed, touched with his fingers, sniffed, and talked to every navel in the collection. Finally, after what Wendy thought was a somewhat overlong and lascivious stare at the Giotto nudes, Dexel stretched and yawned, came over to where she sat and began to repack his equipment in the smaller case. Very carefully he pressed the empty chip bags flat and laid them in as well.

"Eleven of these and you get a free hamburger," he said to her, very conscious of the importance of this advice. "I can usually get up to two hamburgers by Saturday. Sometimes three! You can get hot dogs too, but not me. Do you know what goes into weiners? The paintings are okay. No trouble getting the ink off. It's water soluble. Took me a while to realize it. I expected more real damage. I'll do it this afternoon if you like. I could do it right away but I've got a euchre game. Beautiful work! The paintings I mean. Even the fake *Garden of Eden*. Nothing like the Renaissance for nudes. Can't understand it though. It just seems so silly."

Wendy Pickell's emotions struggled with shock, relief and developing awareness. She jumped to her feet.

"Of course it's fake! The *Garden*. The *Garden of Eden*. I should have seen that right away!" She felt out of breath. "That explains the raisins too—and the tipoff. The thief has still got the real one!" She sat down and put her head in her hands. Dexel meanwhile put his glove back on and opened the one remaining bag of chips. "I'm going to be on the Ogden estate forever," Wendy moaned softly.

Mark Dexel was the expert but, even so, he assumed that Wendy would know the anonymous Garden of Eden was a fake. Why?

And why does Wendy say that the fake Garden of Eden explains the raisins and the tipoff?

See page 268 for the solution to the December puzzle.

Springtime in Appalachia Or, At Witt's End

by Robert Halsted

The interstate was rolling by at a soft and comfortable seventy, the pale green foliage was lushing up the dark limbs on the hillsides. I saw dogwoods blooming, and a tree I thought was a redbud. Though my major career goal was early retirement, I considered taking off a while between jobs to smell the flowers.

No reason not to, I said to myself. With Annette gone, I'd have to train another partner, and maybe sell some shares and bonds by myself to finance the waiting period and a new office setup. For various reasons I'd had to take a serious loss on furnishings when I closed my Cincinnati office. And then I was quite a bit out of pocket for the wedding present when Annette decided to marry a nice respectable boy and become a pillar of the community. Not to mention my personal sense of loss.

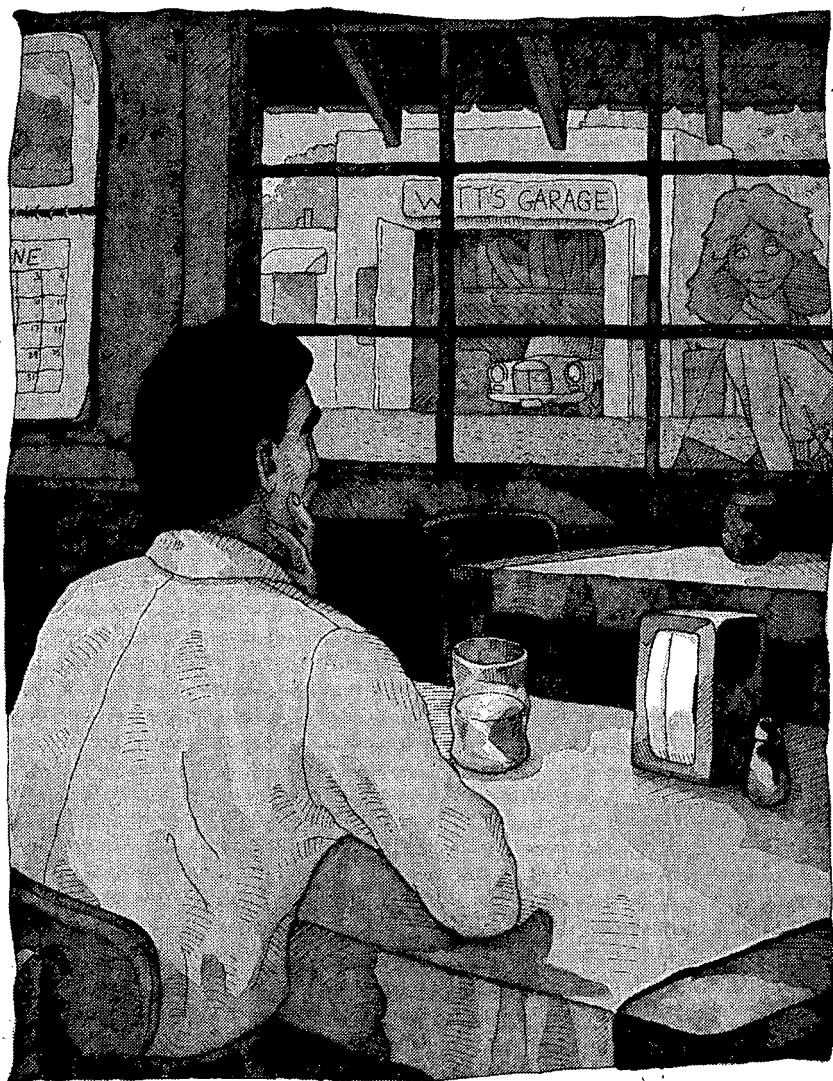
I enjoy my chosen work. I'm an independent securities broker, and have licenses for half the states in the Union, some of which I've never been in. They come from the same printer who does my stocks and bonds. I thought back over my last major transaction, just before I'd left Cincinnati, with warm satisfaction.

"Look, Ted," I was saying. "I'm not asking for donations for the needy. I'm just trying to get this little old lady the best dollar I can in a distress situation."

"So maybe the best dollar isn't as good as she'd like. So maybe she'll learn to manage better."

I showed agitation, repressed irritation. I'm very good at that. "Look, at nearly eighty years old, crippled with arthritis, management lessons aren't going to do her a hell of a lot of good. Her husband took care of all the financial matters, then when he died she got stung by an unscrupulous lawyer." (I started to say "broker.") "And the nursing home she's going into will cost her three grand a month. Figure how long even the hundred or so she'd realize at full market will last there. Less than three years."

We talked on and on as I painted the little old lady into a des-



AS I WAS DAWDLING OVER A COLD BREAD PUDDING AS EXCELLENT AS THE REST OF THE MEAL, THE GIRL I WAS IN MY MIND CALLING DAISY MAE PASSED BY THE WINDOW.

perate corner. Twenty thousand tax bill—the lawyer's fault; of course—and the Feds hovering like vultures to slap a lien on the house. Booting her out onto the street and rendering the house unsaleable. Old debts her husband had left uncovered, come back to haunt her. I was ready to cry myself before I finished.

"Be realistic," Ted said. "I might be able to move 'em discounted thirty, thirty-five points. And I'm not gonna broker at one and a half when it's my cash on the line. When do the Feds start closing in on her?"

I still have trouble believing how dumb people are willing to assume you are when they think you're over a barrel: "Like nine A.M. Thursday. I just found out this morning." I looked glum, half believing what I said. "Even a week's notice, I could have got her market less my one and a half percent, ninety-eight five on her money, for enough to stall the Feds." I inhaled deeply and blew out through slack lips. I'm good at that, too. "Look, Ted. This is blue chip stuff, the kind of shares Du Ponts and Rockefellers own. Not penny stocks, not spec stuff, not uranium mines in Patagonia. I told her I could move it for maybe ten points discount."

He started to pretend sympathy, decided not to bother, and put his natural, gloating look on his face. "So do it if you can."

"Look, I've told you. Nobody else I'd trust in the deal has the liquid funds to handle it as quick as she needs. If I have to go to New York, that's two days at least, plus travel costs, enough to eat up my whole commission." I snapped open my calfskin attaché case, came up with an envelope stuffed with a sheaf of stock certificates. I pulled a couple out, fine examples of quality American printing. "Look. Good stuff. This is the kind of thing I'm trying to sell for her. Not junk."

I shook one in his face, and he couldn't resist the feel of it. More so even than in the old days, now that stock shares and money are mostly ciphers on a video screen, they can't resist the look and feel of the real thing when they do see it. He wanted it, bundles of it. All that remained now was to strike a balance point.

I looked a little humble, but very sincere and businesslike, as I pulled it back from under his nose. He was actually grooving on the smell of the ink. Not that I hadn't so intended. "Ted, I've been thinking as we talked here. I believe it would be to her advantage, considering the urgency of the situation, to discount as much as twenty points, on the whole portfolio physically delivered. I'd appreciate it, though, if you could be easier on her than that."

"*Easier!*" He glared at me. "Look, Abe, I might have to let them go at twenty-five, thirty points myself. I don't mind going along with you when you're helping out your widows and orphans—" this was an image I'd carefully cultivated, and even let him make a little off me doing it "—but I can't afford to pay the old bat ten thou to boot for letting me do her a favor."

We haggled and quibbled for a while longer. He made a final offer to take it all, as per manifest in hand, at thirty-three point three and inf discount. Which was exactly what I'd intended from the beginning.

I like a thirty-three and a third discount in cases like this. It means the vulture is paying two for one, double indemnity, for every pound of flesh he would've taken.

"Well," I said slowly, my depression so palpable and unquestionable that I was contemplating suicide, "I can't in good conscience recommend this to her. I'm obliged to report the offer, but I'll recommend against it."

The following noon I showed up with the attaché case, discreetly handcuffed to me, containing the whole portfolio, and with a negative commentary on the old lady's sanity, or lack thereof. He examined the stocks, sniffed the ink, felt the weight of the paper between his fingers, ran his nail down the engraved margins. Not testing, just enjoying.

He started to have his secretary write me a check. "Uh-uh," I said. "Her father lost his shirt in '33, holding an eighty thousand dollar check just as Roosevelt declared the Bank Holiday. She doesn't trust checks for more than a hundred dollars. Let's go get it in cash."

He grumbled, but we did. We loaded the case with nearly seventy thousand in mixed denominations in a little private office and locked it back onto me, and I went to deliver it to Mrs. Mary W. Shelley, a creature of my imagination. Not that her broker, Abraham Stoker, didn't have his imaginary side, too.

Another aspect of my business ethics: All con men—and, increasingly, women—ply their trade by using, as in jujitsu, the opponent's own driving force—in this case greed, pure and simple—in reverse leverage to assure his downfall. This is the moral standard in our trade. But some practitioners are careless of ethical side-effects, as for example impoverishing widows and orphans or bankrupting honest businessmen as they bystand.

Me, I don't prey upon the little folk, or take illicitly the wealth

of a man whose only sin is being wealthy. I intend to be one of those myself one day. Also, I assure you that I have never issued fiat stock certificates on any corporation that hasn't done me a substantial disservice as a consumer.

After this transaction, I let Annette's wedding arrangements distract me, and spent too much time before I cut and ran. Cost me some money, but it was worth it. I was sorry I couldn't stay to give her away, but somebody did a better scratch-and-sniff job than Ted had on the certificates and I had to go. Cincinnati can get amazingly hot in April.

All the while I was watching the scenery, I was savoring the bitter along with the sweet. I missed Annette, and not just for business reasons. When you travel with somebody, doing creative work in the field of securities and sharing a level of confidence required in very few business relationships, you tend to get personally close as well. Though we'd agreed in advance, and all that.

A few miles down the road from where smelling the flowers had first occurred to me, I saw a sign that said SCENIC DRIVE NEXT EXIT.

What the hell, I said to myself, and got in the right lane.

I took the ramp down, practiced lowering my adrenaline from interstate levels for a few miles. Pulled onto the shoulder and put the top down, wondering why I'd ever chosen a career that kept me inside a stuffy office. The road dipped down into hollows and climbed up to hilltops; and I absorbed myself into the scenery.

How long the lights on my dash had been shining and blinking I don't know. The engine clattered as I climbed a hill, and I looked down to see the alternator and temperature warnings showing. I stopped at the top of the hill, pulled out onto an overlook, and opened the engine room.

The fan belt was chewed to shreds from a loose pulley. The alternator, water pump, and fan hadn't been turning for at least long enough to overheat the engine. The only tools I had aboard were a jack and a lug wrench, and I didn't see any way I could tighten the bolt on the adjuster with them.

While I was waiting for the engine to cool down, I looked at the map in the glove box. A couple of miles down the road I could take a side road to a spot on the map named Dooleymont. There should be at least a phone and a local I could pay to go for a belt and borrow an adjustable wrench from.

I slowly worked my way to Dooleymont, coasting down hills and stopping on the crests to cool off. When I got there, it looked more hopeful than I'd expected. I passed a general store, the Dooleymont Cafe, and the Dooleymont Court Motel—four rustic cabins in a row—and at the far end, Witt's Garage. I pulled up in front of the garage and switched the engine off.

While I was waiting to see if anyone came out—there's a slight political advantage in who comes to whom—I opened the hood and took another look. At first I thought there was some kind of damaged machine running in the shop, but it turned out to be what I think is called country acid rock, turned up loud.

I finally went in, and the character I saw working on an old Ford pickup wasn't who I would have chosen to deal with. I'm pretty good at sizing up people, and this one I took as uncouth, illiterate, dishonest, and prone to violence. Though as events transpired, it turned out I'd erred on the positive side. He was a hybrid of old and new styles in American backwoodsmen, with long hair and beard merging into hairy chest. No coonskin hat, but a baseball cap worn backwards.

"Hi," I said over the noise. "I seem to need a fan belt." For any job not requiring a doctoral degree, I've found it wise to look dumber than you are instead of trying to look smarter. As it turned out in this case, that was a short range tactical disadvantage but a long range strategic advantage.

Without a word he finished turning in a manifold bolt, wiped his hands on a greasy rag, and hulked out to look at the Mercedes. I'd chosen a grey roadster, rather than yellow or red, as more in keeping with the dignity of my profession, and had already put the Delaware tags on before leaving Cincinnati.

"Ain't got one that size in stock," he said. "Hafta order one from town. Too late today. Git it tomorrow. You c'n put up at the mo-tel tonight."

O-kay. One of those. Don't resist, put up with it with no backtalk, cut and run as soon as you see an opening. "No way you could patch me up and get me back on the road till I can get to the next big town? I've got a business appointment in New York Thursday. I'd be glad to pay you extra for your trouble, like maybe sending somebody to town for it." Actually, my next appointment, if any, was to be in Miami.

He shook his hand. "No way. Gotta check out other thaings, too. Bust a belt lack this means there's sump'n else wrong, too. Froze

up water pump, bad alternator bearin'. Cootn put you back on the road that way." He essayed a fake grin, gapped and broken teeth stained from chewing Red Man. "Braing it on in."

Uh-oh.

He opened the barn door on the other side of the garage, I started the car, and he guided me in. He had me off balance and was pushing. As I got out of the car, I said over the din of the prole serenade, "This is a very important appointment I have in New York. I could come up with an extra fifty if it's ready by noon tomorrow."

He grinned again. "Do ma best." He pretended serious thought for a moment. "Tail you what. You go ahead and gimme that fifty now, for a 'vance on parts, and we can hurry it up better."

"Certainly," I shouted. "I'll need a receipt, so I can get reimbursed by the company." I fumbled for my wallet and drifted toward the door of the little office.

Sitting on the counter in the office was a small blonde, and leaning next to her a character almost, if not quite, as ugly as the mechanic Fate had chosen for me.

If Annette had been six inches shorter, blonde and blue-eyed instead of raven-locked and brown-eyed, pettily buxom instead of slim and slinky, she would have had a marked resemblance to this girl. Which is to say, they both gave the impression of wiggling in all the right places while sitting stockstill.

My computerlike brain—a necessary piece of office equipment in my trade, and not mere luxury furniture—made a number of assessments in milliseconds. It assessed the girl as a potential front desk ornament and after-hours recreational adjunct, and decided that given an I.Q. over fifty she'd do for both. It assessed the I.Q., and saw a twinkle of eye and a curl of lip indicating a higher potential than required to meet Dooleymont standards. It assessed the hillbilly next to her as possessive and possibly more dangerous than the first one. It reassessed the girl as a probable member of the conspiracy and possibly the genius, relatively speaking, behind the plot.

I'd already looked too long to pretend not to have. I looked the second mean boy in the eye, man to man, gestured at the girl, and said, "I don't know who decorated your office, but I'd like to hire him to do mine, if he has any more furniture like this." Depersonalize the broad, in a case like this, while praising the guy's taste.

I'd dealt with that type before. Look at my sport model, but don't try to drive it.

"Hey, I ain't no office furniture," she said. "Ah'm Joy Sue Witt, and this here's my boyfriend Bobby Russell Dooley." I took the initiative and shook hands with Bobby Russell, picking up a lot of grease in the process. "And that big lump over yonder is ma brother Billy Wayne." She giggled. "There pretty much ain't nobody round here but Witts and Dooleys. 'xpect my daddy was a travelin' salesman."

"Shut up, Joy Sue," said Billy Wayne.

That was a good time to reach into my wallet, so I did. I let them see a hundred or so in smaller bills, but didn't open the inner compartment that was all hundreds. I selected two twenties and a ten and handed them to Billy Wayne. "If the bill is very big, I'll have to give you a traveler's check," I told him. When you don't know the game, open with a pair of deuces and don't show your hole card.

Where I was politically was right at the fulcrum. No leverage. Billy Wayne Witt was on the long end and pushing. "Do you suppose I should call the motel for a reservation?" I asked, not without subtly ironic intent.

"Naw. Cousin o' mine runs it, they'll put y'up." Wasted irony, except maybe for a little twinkle in Joy Sue's eye. Just as well. I didn't want him for an enemy till I was on the way out of Dooleymont. Uneasy but with no other immediate resource, I took the overnighter and attaché case out of the trunk and trudged the couple of hundred yards to the Dooleymont Court.

Mrs. Dooley, who ran the place, made a better impression on me than her cousin-in-law, or whatever he was, had done. She showed me a primitive but clean room—lumpy mattress, sweet sun-dried sheets on it—and I paid her for the night.

I concealed the bulk of my funds from the attaché case in a way that's never let me down, and the rest about my person. During trips most of it stays in a fake defroster hose under the dashboard. Then I headed for Dooley's Cafe.

The meal was nothing remarkable, which relieved me a great deal. My travels in the rural South have convinced me that the exceptional meal there is not likely to be an exceptionally good one.

When I finished eating, it was still a while before dark, so I decided to walk to the end of the main drag and see if the rural

roadside offered a wildflower to smell. The only one I'd seen so far in Dooleymont I hadn't dared to get within sniffing distance of.

Some people in my line of business don't like to work with women. I'm the opposite. Besides being ornamental and a pleasant presence in the office, the right woman can be invaluable in a high class scam operation, not only by distracting the mark but also by applying a Byzantine sense of business ethics that starts where mine leaves off.

I walked around a bend in the road and Dooleymont disappeared, improving the scenery considerably. I was pacing along, thinking sad sweet thoughts about my retired partner, when an apparition erupted from the underbrush right in front of me.

A very nice apparition. Mostly a pleasant buff color, briefly interrupted by cutoffs and a halter that looked skimpy only in terms of relative capacity. Still barefoot. In the late light her basically honey-colored hair had a bronzey tinge. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," I answered. It seemed about as safe as anything I could have said. Then I added impulsively, "Where's your jealous boyfriend?" Just as well to be up front about what I really meant in a case like this.

Candid big blue eyes, unreadable smile. "He's back heppin' Billy Wayne mess up yo' car."

Uncertain whether she had had a momentary lapse into honesty or was just rubbing it in, I replied blandly, "I figured I'd have to pay extra to get out of Dooleymont. I'd rather pay them extra, however, for *not* messing it up."

Still all sweetness and innocence, she answered, "They won't mess it up very bad. Ain't got sense enough 'tween the two of 'em to do anything complicated."

I realized we were walking down the road side by side, a pleasant companionate feeling. "If they take too long to mess it and unmess it, I'll just have to have it towed to town and fly the rest of the way."

She shook her head. "They'd show that tow truck driver a bill you wootn b'lieve." She looked over her shoulder. "He's comin'. I gotta go." I'd heard, felt, and smelt nothing, but maybe she had a sixth sense. She disappeared into the bush, leaving me to walk down the road, wishing for a walking stick to whip the heads off dandelions as I strolled.

It was nearly two minutes before I heard an inadequately muffled V8 behind me. I moved onto the shoulder and kept walking like

a city slicker out to smell the flowers. Bobby Russell pulled up beside me. "Lookin' fer sump'n?" he asked.

I shook my head and smiled. "Just out for a walk. Smelling the flowers."

He looked at me like a mental case. "See Joy Sue?"

"Joyce who?" I looked puzzled.

"Joy Sue."

I let comprehension dawn on me. "Oh, the girl who was with you in your office?" He nodded. "Not since I was eating supper. I thought I saw her, or somebody about her size and color, walk by the cafe. I wasn't looking real closely." If she had, I would have been.

"Which way's she goin'?"

I gestured. "Back toward the garage from the cafe. If it *was* her. As I said, I wasn't looking closely."

He ground the machine into gear and thundered off. I got the impression he was checking less on her than on her and me. I walked a way farther, decided the safest course of action was to be ensconced in my room before dark, and turned back to Dooleymont.

On the way back I heard a rustling in the bush; a pert blonde head popped out of the shrubbery like a bird out of a Black Forest clock and said, "Thanks, mister. I owe ya one."

"I may need it," I said to the vacated foliage.

When I got back, I drew the curtains, put a couple of patent gadgets on door and window, and checked my cache of cash. Then I settled down with a flask and a paperback from my luggage. In my line of trade you learn to turn off the uptight. So I was over a barrel, that was a fact of life. So there was a way out, that was another. I had a good yawn a little after ten o'clock, took a good night's sleep with interesting dreams, and woke with the birds.

If the rural south is iffy on lunch and dinner, it's pretty reliable for breakfast. The eggs and sausage were real, the grits and taters and toast were tolerable, and there was enough cream and sugar to disguise the coffee.

Billy Wayne, not surprisingly, outwaited me, though I gave him time not to. Going on lunchtime I strolled by for a progress report, only to discover that the job was going to cost more than the mechanic had originally estimated. Imagine that. It seemed the diverter valve had clogged, damaging the recirculator. Herr Benz would have been astounded. I waited for him to tell me about the frammistan and the gizmo, but apparently they were okay.

"Bobby Russell run into town a while ago to see if he can find 'em. If we hafta order 'em, it'll take another couple o' days and cost some extra."

He was building up a bigger case than I liked. I'd planned for about a hundred dollar ripoff, but no way was this one going to stop there.

I decided to set up a reference point or two. "Well, I've got about three hundred dollars more and twenty-four hours left to get this whole thing cleared up and hit the road. Otherwise, I'll have to just walk away, catch a plane, and let my insurance company make the arrangements. Trouble is, they're getting pretty hard-nosed about investigating. They once thought I was in cahoots with a body shop that was trying to pull a scam on me."

Granting an I.Q. of thirty or more—and I figured Billy Wayne might just about manage that—he couldn't have failed to see the implicit threat. I saw his eyes flicker and the tip of his tongue touch his lip before he regained his phlegmatic mien.

"Wail, don't you worry about that. We'll have you all fixed up by mornin'. If it ends up a little more'n you got, reckon I'll just hafta trust you to send the rest."

Uh-oh. When a crook offers to trust you, there's more trouble yet to come. Look how I'd trusted Ted, for instance.

"Great. I assure you, I'm good for every penny I end up owing you." Like suing the rascal for damages: "Well, I'm getting a little hungry. Could I buy you lunch?" I meant some kind of test by that, but wasn't quite sure what.

"Naw, I wanna keep on the job here, git you back on the road." Conscientious. "I'll git ma sister to braing me a samwich."

I sat in Dooley's Cafe delectating over the luncheon special, country steak with instant mashed potatoes and canned green beans. I hoped Billy Wayne would finish ripping me off before I died of scurvy.

As I was dawdling over a cold bread pudding as excellent as the rest of the meal, the girl I was in my mind calling Daisy Mae passed by the window. She smiled when she saw me, and before I thought, I winked. I thought she actually blushed. I began wondering what was considered legal size in these hills, and how they dealt with furriners who violated spoken and unspoken codes.

Not that I planned to do anything funny with the lady. But it was much more important not to *look* as if I were doing anything

funny with her. Since I had a secret on her, I was probably safe this time, but in my profession even a momentary lapse rings alarm bells. A little misdabbling could get me in worse trouble than a mere roadside ripoff.

Dooleymont was getting boring, and I was getting antsy about the car. Granting the premise Joy Sue had implied, that they were too dumb to try anything complex, they were also dumb enough to botch something simple and parlay a fan belt job into an engine overhaul without even intending to.

I decided to make only one more visit to the garage that day, in order to keep the politics from getting any further out of balance in the enemy's favor. So I walked my boredom and tension off by climbing a mountain. Just a little mountain, like the hill that overlooked the corrupt and decadent metropolis of Dooleymont, a sister under the skin to Detroit, L.A., and New York.

By the time I got to the top, I was huffing and puffing. The sedentary indoor life is not conducive to staying fit. Nonetheless, I felt better after I recovered.

Maybe it was the extra supply of oxygen to my brain, or maybe, as someone once told me, there's a kind of meditation quality in looking at good scenery. Whatever the cause, I found as I watched the really handsome countryside that my thinking was improving.

My first thought was to buy a mountaintop in a place like Jamaica, and not to wait till the interest on my first million was outgrowing withdrawal from dividends. Double up on my operation, work two or three towns concurrently, then semi-retire while I was young enough to enjoy it.

This brought a pang about all I wasn't going to enjoy sharing with Annette, so I looked for another thought.

I found it. The complete procedure for escaping from Dooleymont revealed itself as if in a blueprint before my eyes. I had a smoke, inhaling shallowly to save my lungs for the climb down, stretched, and rambled back toward the misinhabited valley. I realized, as I looked behind bushes on the way down, that I wasn't looking out for murderous hillbillies as much as for congenial company to complicate my existence further. I put that thought away, too.

Back down in the valley, I was so full of good cheer about my escape plan that I had to restrain my exuberance lest I tip off the enemy. I pretended to be briskly stimulated by my walk up the hill when I stuck my nose in the garage on the way to the cafe.

"How's it going?" I asked Billy Wayne.

"Be ready fust thaing in the mornin', soon's Bobby Russell can pick up one more part," he answered. "Don't you worry none about it."

"You boys have been working so hard, why don't you let me buy you a beer or two after supper?"

"Don't mind if Ah do. Sounds lack a rat good idee." I could see him looking for the hook, but his natural-born drunken greed already had a pocket full of proxies, ripe for a hostile takeover. We arranged to meet at the local beer place at seven.

By about ten o'clock, they'd had eight or ten beers apiece and I'd had one. Being an effete city slicker, I asked for a glass with mine, and they, being rough touch machos, drank it out of the can. I'd open a can, top up my glass with an ounce of it, and put the can down where one or the other of them could switch an empty for it. At first they thought they were putting one over on me, and later were too sozzled to see me putting one over on them. By then I was just pouring my ounce and shoving it under their noses.

A little after ten I stood up, stretched, and yawned. "Well, gentlemen," I announced, "I'm getting good and relaxed, and I've got to get some paperwork done before my conference in New York. Have another round on me and cover the tip if you would." I put a ten down and figured they might leave the waitress a quarter. I'd bought more than enough working time, like till the next day unless they were more superhuman than they looked.

I strolled to my room, did some make-ready, turned off the lights, and sneaked out through the shadows to the garage.

The dollar ninety-eight barn door padlock was easy enough for a skilled securities vendor. I let myself in, came back with a screwdriver, and detached the hasp so it would look locked but I could open it from the inside for a quick escape by shoving a blade through the crack. Then I went around the back in through a rear door I'd unlocked from inside.

Checking it out and undoing their depredations with an AA cell penlight was not easy, but I was afraid to use anything bigger. My water pump was in place, sprayed now with a toxic-looking blue paint and reinstalled with too much Permatex. I checked hose connections and other obvious things they might have done wrong, and all seemed okay. The radiator was empty and the drain cocks open, so I helped myself to a new can of their coolant.

I picked a new belt of the right size off their hanging wall display and put it on in a couple of minutes. Gross. Not only were they criminals, they left their tools greasy.

Figuring they had underestimated me but not completely, I checked battery terminals—tight—and ignition leads—visually okay. On a hunch, I pulled the distributor cap, and sure enough, they'd taken out the rotor. It took me a couple of minutes, but I found it on the bench and reinstalled it. I went around, checked tires, trunk contents, and my fake distributor hose with thirty grand in it. All shipshape, ready for road testing. I looked through all the windows I could find. Not a soul on the street.

Using my spare keys—I'd left them only the ignition, which wasn't in the switch now—I primed it and cranked it. It caught instantly and purred to life. Quick check of instrumentation, signals, and lights, in case they'd deliberately or inadvertently done a disconnect. A-1. Ready for the road.

I cut the engine, went out the back door, and crept to the motel for my luggage and a good hand wash. The village had no street lights, so invisibility wasn't hard. I risked a look through a side window into the beer joint, and the table where we'd been was empty. Not surprisingly. I decided to give them a few minutes, in case they'd just left and for some reason decided to stop at the garage on the way. I lurked in the shadows for a while, but no sign of life, so I crept in the unlocked back door.

I'd made a couple of audible steps before I sensed a presence, as we psychics say. I went dead still and listened, and there was the least little rustle of sound from near my car.

As my eyes accommodated to the dark, I saw the hood was back up. There was somebody in my engine room in the dark.

Ever so silently I picked up a long-handled lug wrench off the bench. I was ready to break a head to get out of that place.

As I crept up behind the dark-clad form draped over the fender, a small clear voice said, "Hand me that there bottle o' ten-twenny offa the truck fender, will ya? I like to never got this damn filter on tight."

More out of curiosity than any other single motive, I took the cap off the yellow pastic bottle and handed it to her.

"You done pretty good," she went on. "You didn't miss nothing but the awl filter. He thought it'd be funny if you did take the car and it stalled out a ways down the road."

I didn't have much to say for a minute. Finally I asked, "How much were they planning to take me for?"

"Hold that light for me while I pour this awl in . . . thanks. Like they was plannin' to end up with the car and you out in the woods somewheres pushin' up daisies."

"You're joking."

"Nope. They was gonna fake the papers and sell it outta town. All they needed to do was git the right notary. They done it before, the papers part. Never kilt nobody I know of."

I decided to remind myself not to leave the title in the glovebox in future. Among other safeguards. "Well, I think it's high time I got out of town. You said you owed me one. Well, you've more than repaid."

She didn't reply directly. "If you'll unlock that trunk, I'll put my valise in."

My surprise was mostly at being surprised. Dooleymont probably wouldn't be very healthy for her either, now. I unlocked the trunk, put in my two bags and her little one. She finished wiping her hands and asked, "You got the front door unlocked, ditton you?"

"Yep." I shoved a screwdriver through the crack to free the hasp, started the car, looked both ways, and eased out of Witt's garage with lights off. She reclosed the door and hopped in with me, and off we went.

Once out of Dooleymont and past the bend, we started breathing and I turned on the lights. Feeling safe for the first time since the fan belt gave out, I drove slow and quiet.

"What are your plans now, young lady?"

"I thought I'd tag along with you for a while."

"I'll take you anyplace reasonable you'd like to go. Give you a long-term interest loan. Grubstake you to a secretarial course or something. I'm not a very respectable person. Not to put too fine a point on it, I'm a con man and a criminal. Not a murderous type like your brother and boyfriend, but not nice company for an innocent young girl."

"I reckon I know a little about con games myself," she replied. She took my hand off the gear lever and stroked it up a soft warm thigh. For a moment I feared the best. Then I felt, tucked into the top of her hose, highly recognizable flattened rolls of quality paper. "That's what I could find o' what they had stashed away from rippin' off other tourists."

"By George, the girl has talent. Do you think you could learn to

type and answer the phone, on a better than average profit sharing plan?"

"Try me. Like I said, my daddy was a travelin' salesman. I ain't dumb like the rest of that bunch, half Dooleys and half Witts. Half Witts, get it?"

"I get it."

"And I took a secretarial course in high school. I think me and you could get somewhere together."

"*You* and *I* could get somewhere together. This is a class operation."

"I assure you, sir, you will be quite satisfied with my services. I was also in the drama club."

I squeezed her and grinned. It looked like the beginning of a good partnership.

(continued from page 4)

Charles M. Saplak (naval officer) have had other stories published before, but not in our pages; Pamela Schossau (technical writer of scripts and video programs) makes her fiction debut here. We are more than delighted with all of their stories, each gripping in its own way.

We should also note that Josephine Bell is new to this magazine, too. On page 119 you'll find a special word about her.

For the rest, there are—as is the practice in our Double Issues—new stories and old. Wasylyk and Crawford, for instance, are here with new entries; Kantner and Ron Butler are represented by the first stories they wrote for AHMM; old favorites like Jack Ritchie and Bill Pronzini are on hand as well.

In short, it's been another fascinating four weeks at the office!

The Courage of Akira-kun

by Ron Butler

My friendship with Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki began with an imitation samurai sword. He was the man who arrested me for trying to carry it home.

It happened about two years after my company put me in charge of our computer hardware office in Okayama; a moderate-sized town in western Japan not far from Hiroshima.

I suppose I should have known better, but few foreigners ever learn everything about Japanese customs or laws. I had purchased the sword at a specialty shop near my office and didn't understand exactly what the clerk was trying to explain to me. I found out later that anyone can buy a sword if he has the price—even the replicas are expensive—but that *nobody* totes one around without special permission from the police. Not even home from the store. Rigid weapons control is a big part of Japanese law enforcement.

The inspector apparently had responded to a call from the nervous clerk shortly after I left the shop on my way to the Tenmaya bus stop. He stopped his cruiser by the curb a few meters

in front of me, got out, and stood in my path, a tall, somber-faced man with hard dark eyes.

"May I see the permit for your sword, sir?" he asked without preliminaries, holding out his white-gloved hand.

"What permit? I didn't know I had to have one."

"Are you a tourist?"

"No. I live here."

"Then I must ask for your alien registration, sir."

All resident foreigners in Japan are supposed to carry the green booklet with photograph and fingerprint, but I was careless and never bothered with it. "I'm sorry, I forgot it."

"Ah, so ka?" Is that right? "I am sorry, but you will have to come with me, sir," he demanded sternly, opening the passenger door on his cruiser.

I had no choice. We crisscrossed through the heavy downtown traffic and drove to the Okayama Prefecture Building while I sat and worried about the consequences of my ignorance.

Once we were seated, the inspector took a large stack of forms from a desk drawer and started on the questions.

Name—Sam Brent. Age—thirty-five. Address—Fukui section, Tsushima district. Length of proposed stay—indefinite. Passport number—I did remember that detail, oddly enough. Marital status—

Marital status hurt. I explained that my wife and son had been killed in a car accident just weeks before they were scheduled to join me in Japan.

"Ah, *gomesnasai*," the inspector said. "I am sorry."

Sorry or not, he charged me with an infraction of the weapons law and I wound up paying a hefty fine. Before I left, he returned the sword, expertly wrapped, stamped the papers giving me permission to carry it, and advised me not to forget my alien registration again.

After I got home, I laid the sword in a corner and made my first drink.

When I learned that I was going to Japan, Jane had decided to wait until the school year was over before making the move with Justin. That gave me time to look for a suitable house, and I found it. It was a two story, semi-Western place with traditional pantile roof, three small rooms with tatami mats, a family room with hardwood floor, kitchen, bath, and john.

Cooking for myself was a bore. I stuck to a simple repertory—instant noodles in a Styro-

foam cup, spaghetti with sauce out of a can, bacon and eggs. When this became too tiresome even for me, I'd go to one of the small restaurants in the neighborhood.

My favorite was the Tsushima Tei, which translates roughly as the Tsushima Place. After a few stiff drinks in that lonely house I'd step down into the entranceway, slip my shoes on, close the sliding glass doors, and go over the bridge that crossed a modest stream running parallel to a main road. I would stroll past the dairy, a laundry, several rice paddies, and the stationer's shop, turning left at the first major intersection. From there it was a walk of no more than five minutes.

The Tsushima Tei was run by a man, his wife, and a younger, surly-looking man who helped with the cooking. I liked the atmosphere: large menus on the walls, eight tables with two chairs each, a counter with four stools, and the usual stack of magazines and newspapers for solitary diners. I was sitting at the counter one night shortly after the rainy season set in, eating a bowl of green noodles and sipping a beer, when I heard another customer enter and take a seat behind me. I recognized the inspector when I stood up to pay my bill.

"*Konbanwa*," I said. Good evening.

"Mr. Brent." He remembered my name. "Please sit down if you are not in a hurry."

"*Domo*." Thanks. Why not? I couldn't resent a man who did his job well, and I had no reason to hurry home. I ordered another beer and asked the inspector if he would join me.

"Thank you, no. I am driving." Sufficient explanation. Drunk driving is a very serious offense in Japan, even for a policeman.

He introduced himself—I hadn't known his name—and we made small talk. I learned that Inspector Ueki (way-key) lived near me, was forty-seven years old, had attended the University of Oregon for two years as an exchange student, was married, and had two daughters, one with her own family and one still at home. In return I gave him a synopsis of my own life. It was still raining when we left and Ueki gave me a ride home, politely refusing my invitation to come in.

In the following weeks, we met often. Ueki usually got off duty late, which fit in with my own habits. By the time the rainy season fizzled out six weeks later, we were on fairly good terms. As we were both steady customers by now, the proprie-

tor started sitting down with us during lulls in business. Doi-san was in his late fifties, with grey hair clipped short in what we used to call a burr. He told us that he had wanted to talk to me for a long time, but was shy. That figured. Except in the larger cities, the Japanese can be almost pathologically wary of *gaijin*, foreigners. Polite and even interested, but wary.

Summer had given way to pleasant days and chilly nights. By then we all knew a good bit about each other. Doi began to tell us of his worries about the younger man who worked in the kitchen. Akira, he told us, was his nephew, and he was turning out to be a troublemaker—disrespectful, resentful, and filled with the radical philosophy of the Dai Nippon (Great Japan) Party, which was pushing for the resurgence of Japan as a major military power. Among other things, that would call for scrapping the constitution which General MacArthur had drawn up—the one forever renouncing war.

I had passed this off as the generation gap, Japanese-style, and was surprised when Ueki came to my office a few days later, telling me that he had an unusual request and would not be offended if I refused. It turned out that Akira had disappeared, along with a hundred thousand

yen—about four hundred dollars. Would I care to go with him to see Doi-san? "He has come to like you very much."

I would, and let my staff know I would be in touch.

Ueki drove me back to headquarters, where he exchanged the cruiser for his personal car, a Honda. "Even if this becomes an official police matter," he explained, "I do not wish to embarrass Doi-san at his place of business."

Doi took us to the privacy of a small storeroom in the rear section of the kitchen when we arrived at the Tsushima Tei. He had no idea where Akira had gone. The money had been taken from their lodgings above the restaurant.

"Perhaps," Ueki suggested, "I can make a reasonable guess. Tomorrow there is to be another demonstration at Narita. The newspapers say that elements from the Dai Nippon Party will be there to give support."

Narita, the vast new international airport outside of Tokyo which had required so much precious farmland, had long been the focus of numerous violent protests involving tens of thousands of police and demonstrators—embittered farmers and radicals looking for a cause.

Doi pursed his lips, shaking his head in frustration. "*Damei, damei.*" No good, no good.

"But," Ueki continued, "I may be able to help in a minor way. I have some days of vacation coming and will travel to Narita. If the demonstration is as well organized as in the past, I may be able to find Akira's group and persuade him to return with the money. This will have to be unofficial, however. I have no jurisdiction in the Tokyo area, and with such large crowds I may never find him."

"Do you mind if I go?" I asked Ueki.

"There is some danger, you must know."

"I'd like to help Doi-san if I can."

"Agreed, then. I will call one of my friends on the Tokyo police force and make the arrangements."

Doi bowed deeply, expressing his thanks.

I met Ueki at the Okayama station early in the morning. We purchased our tickets and rode the escalator to the platform for the nine twenty Shin-kansen, the "Bullet Train" that would whisk us over much of the length of the island of Honshu.

The long, sleek train, gliding silently on electric power, arrived at precisely nine seventeen. We waited for the Okayama-bound passengers to disembark, stepped aboard, and went directly to the restaurant

car. We had just been seated when the train began to pull out of the station, on schedule to the second. In the next four and a half hours the Shinkansen would average a hundred and fifty miles an hour, unless one of the frequent earthquakes brought us to an automatic safety stop.

Ueki and I ordered the same breakfast—juice, toast, ham and eggs, and black coffee.

He finished first, leaned back, and lit a cigarette. "Mr. Brent, it was decent of you to make this trip. It is a typical Japanese gesture, and Doi-san will always be in your debt."

"It was decent of you too, inspector. What I can't understand is why Doi-san would permit a foreigner to be involved in his personal problems."

Ueki smiled. "He tells me that you bear your own sorrows with dignity, and that he thinks you are brave to live in a land where almost everyone is a stranger to you. Doi-san thinks you have a strong character."

I paid the checks, ignoring Ueki's protests, and we found adjacent places in a non-reserved seating section. Ueki told me that Doi had been in the Japanese Imperial Army during the war, serving as a cook during the China campaign. He had been beaten severely by his lieutenant when he became ill while

watching some of the outrages in Nanking.

There was nothing to say. Ueki dozed. I sat with my eyes closed and lost myself in the past.

Detective Okamoto, Ueki's friend, met us at the station with word that the situation at Narita was serious. Air traffic had not been interrupted, but several thousand demonstrators had been massed since morning at one of the chain link outer security fences.

Siren wailing, we swerved and dodged our way through Tokyo's traffic and out to the highway leading to Narita. A trip that normally takes nearly an hour by air terminal bus took us thirty minutes.

I saw them at the same time I heard them—thousands of angry men carrying homemade shields, foreheads bound with white strips of cloth to show their dedication. They held lengths of chain, pipes, clubs, and, most ominously, kerosene-filled bottles.

The security forces were in place: additional thousands of equally determined men, silent in disciplined ranks. They wore riot helmets with protective Plexiglas visors, holding their professionally made rectangular shields slung over one arm. Many were equipped with tear



THERE WAS NO TIME TO SHOUT A WARNING, AND IT LANDED TO UEKI'S
RIGHT, BURSTING WITH A WHOOSHING CRUMP.

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gas launchers, and all had long, stout truncheons.

Okamoto ran to join his command while Ueki and I walked to a cluster of reporters and television cameramen behind a row of parked police cars.

On cue from their group leaders, each screaming through a bullhorn, the demonstrators surged against the fence. One section gave; rocks and other debris flew. The security forces rushed forward and we heard the dry crack of shield against shield. Truncheons swished. The two forces drew apart, leaving men from both sides lying on the ground.

Ueki had turned to tell me something when I saw it arcing through the air toward us—a bottle of kerosene, wick ablaze, trailing thin black smoke. There was no time to shout a warning, and it landed to Ueki's right, bursting with a whooshing crump.

His clothes were in flames as I dragged him to the ground, smothering him against my body, rolling in the dirt, slapping at the flames with my hands. Then something struck me in the head.

It was painful but not serious. My left hand was swathed in a bandage and the right one had a few nasty blisters. What hurt most was the throbbing purple knot on my temple where the

rock had scored. Ueki had lucked out with minor body burns and a few scorched places on his face.

For the return trip, he insisted on paying for reserved seats, and we caught the last westbound Shinkansen of the night. We sat silently for a while, and Ueki noticed that I was cradling my bandaged hand in the blistered one. "It hurts?"

"A little," I lied.

"Then we must partake of the best of old Japanese remedies." He signaled to one of the vendors pushing a cart of refreshments up the aisle. "*Sake o, kudasai. Ni hon.*" The individual plastic bottles of sake held about a half-pint each.

"*Kampai,*" he said, lifting the bottle. Cheers. We sipped. The potent rice wine cut through the tensions of the day.

"We both saw many things today," Ueki said after a few minutes. "Just before that regrettable incident with the fire bomb, I was sure I had spotted Akira and some hoodlums I recognized from Okayama. What I learned I will tell to Doi-san and see if the money is returned." He drank the remainder of his sake. "For your part, Mr. Brent, what did you see?"

I considered. "It was almost like seeing a movie of two feudal samurai armies, inspector. The battle cries, clubs used as swords,

helmets, and shields. Two great forces in conflict, good and bad."

"Exactly so!" Ueki said, delighted. "Even our way of violence follows old traditions. As you may know, no private citizen in Japan can own a handgun or a rifle, and one must work very hard even to earn a hunting license which allows limited use of a shotgun. We find other ways, nevertheless. The knife is our favorite weapon for homicide. Why are you laughing?"

"Because I've got proof that something as simple as a rock is still a good weapon," I replied, touching the knot on my head with my unbandaged hand.

"*So desu.*" That's right. "You may have saved my life today, Mr. Brent, and, like Doi-san, I am in your debt."

I bought the next round.

The dining car had already closed when we boarded the late train, so Ueki suggested we go to his home to eat. I was startled. Friendships develop slowly in Japan, and an invitation to a man's home is a considerable honor. My polite objections to the imposition at such a late hour were overcome, and Ueki dropped a ten yen coin into a pay phone to call his wife. We took a cab in front of the Okayama station.

Mrs. Ueki stood on the step above the entranceway, dis-

tressed at the sight of our injuries. She took house slippers from a rack and placed them so we could step up into them easily, making small sounds of concern all the while.

Ueki introduced us, she welcomed me to their home, and I bowed my apologies for intruding upon their privacy. Ueki gave her a brief outline of what had happened at Narita.

He led the way to the family room, furnished in modern Western, and we took seats next to each other on a large sofa. Mrs. Ueki, a diminutive, serene-looking woman with strands of white in her hair, brought an ice bucket from the kitchen and placed it next to a bottle and glasses on the coffee table. Ueki poured two light drinks of smooth scotch.

I met her then. She didn't merely walk, she glided, and when she bowed to us from the sliding door with its panes of white paper, I thought of willow trees bending gracefully in a summer breeze.

"This is Noriko," Ueki said. "My daughter."

There was no need for me to stand to greet a woman, but I did, aware of the impression my battered body must have made. She bowed again, then looked up at me.

Lustrous cervine eyes to match the deerlike way she walked.

Long, glossy black hair. A voice like a caress. Shyly, she left us for the kitchen, returning with a plate of snacks—cold sliced octopus in vinegar, small dried fish, and *mikan*, mandarin oranges.

Mrs. Ueki politely called us to dinner. We took off our slippers and padded to the dining room, where the tatami mats were as clean as the day they were first put down. I was asked to sit in front of the tokonoma, the spiritual hearth of the Japanese home—an alcove close to the short-legged table where we would eat. The only decorations were a gnarled, polished piece of cypress and a calligraphy scroll that hung on the wall above a vase of flowers.

"This is too much of an honor, Ueki-san," I pleaded. "I'll be uncomfortable sitting in your place."

"No, no, not at all." Ueki beamed, enjoying the role of generous host. "Please sit." I assumed the cross legged position. Mrs. Ueki and Noriko placed the food on the table, apologizing repeatedly for its poor quality. Sashimi, sushi, boiled shrimp, tempura lotus roots, and salad.

It was a feast, and I directed my eyes toward Noriko whenever I thought I could without being noticed. She didn't look back. Ueki suggested brandy

when we finished, but I declined. It had been a long day, I was bushed, and the knot on my head felt like a watermelon. "Just let me call a taxi," I said, "and I'll leave you to get some rest."

"Oh, we could never do that, Bulentu-san," Noriko said. I loved the way she pronounced my name. "You will be our guest tonight."

"Yes," Mrs. Ueki insisted. "And your bath is ready."

"If he has any trouble because of his hands, one of you will help," Ueki ordered.

I stammered my assurances of self-sufficiency all the way to the tile-floored bath, where I laddled, soaped, ladled, and then lowered myself into the sunken tub of steaming water, carefully keeping my bandage dry.

Later, when I crawled into the bedding Mrs. Ueki had unrolled for me in an upstairs room, I fell asleep instantly.

Our office had a backlog of details awaiting my attention. We had pioneered in bilingual computer printouts, and our hardware was being installed by a lot of industries exporting everything from salted fish to cassette recorders. Our equipment made it a lot easier to handle standardized business letters, invoices, and instructions in understandable English.

Several days passed before I was caught up, and I telephoned Ueki at his office to see when he wanted to meet. Yes, the bandage had come off—the hand looked good. Yes, this evening would be satisfactory. I went to the Tsushima Tei after stopping by the house to clean up.

I arrived first and Mr. and Mrs. Doi were still thanking me for making the trip when Ueki came in. Doi relayed the information that Akira and the money were still missing. “Do you wish to make formal charges against him?” Ueki asked.

“That would be shameful. Akira is my nephew.”

“Well, do you need the money now, Doi-san?”

Doi bowed his head. “It would help. Our restaurant is small.”

“I cannot promise you, but we may be able to get it back for you tonight,” Ueki said. “You will accompany me again, Mr. Brent, won’t you?”

In his car, driving past Okayama University, Ueki told me he had given a description of Akira to some of his men and asked them to keep the local members of the Dai Nippon Party under observation when they returned to Okayama. Akira had been spotted two days later and had been followed to his girlfriend’s apartment.

The apartment building was

one of the ubiquitous cinder block structures that provided inexpensive housing for students and unmarried office workers. We parked by a decrepit-looking tobacco shop that was closed for the night. As we stood outside Apartment 6, we heard laughter from inside. Ueki knocked.

The girl who opened the door appeared to be in her early twenties. She was wearing the uniform of the modern generation—imitation jeans and faded denim shirt. Akira was sitting on the floor with a glass of beer in his hand.

“Get up, Akira-kun,” Ueki snapped, flashing his identification card. The “kun” was a put down—something like “sir,” but used for people of obviously inferior social rank.

Akira, face twisted in anger, grabbed a beer bottle and leaped to his feet, swinging as he lunged at Ueki. Ueki stepped sideways and caught Akira in the throat with the edge of his hand. Akira dropped, gasping for breath. The girl cowered in a corner.

Ueki stared down at Akira. “There is a matter of one hundred thousand yen that you took from your uncle, Doi-san. I will have it from you tonight, and I am not particular about how I get it.”

Akira, rubbing his throat, snarled, “Why is that stupid foreigner here?”

Ueki leaned down, grabbed Akira by the front of his shirt, and slammed him against the wall, slapping his face repeatedly. "Because," he said, "this man is more loyal to your uncle than you are, has ten times the courage of the scum who acted like barbarians at Narita, and is my friend as well. The money, Akira. Now."

Akira moaned. "*Hai.*" Yes. He turned his face toward the girl and demanded her purse. She handed it to him, and he removed ten of the ten-thousand-yen bills.

"Where did you get the money?" Ueki demanded.

"She is secretary of the Dai Nippon Party in Okayama Prefecture. I will have to repay it."

Ueki slapped him again and grinned. "That is welcome news. Perhaps they will ask for interest." We left.

Doi and his wife were profoundly grateful for the return of the money, but the Tsushima Tei was filled with customers. We left with a promise to return when Doi had time to talk. I made only a few token protests when Ueki invited me to his home again.

This time Noriko greeted us. I made myself comfortable on the sofa while Ueki went to change clothes. Noriko was wearing a flowered house ki-

mono. "Please, Bulentu-san," she asked demurely, "would you like to see my father's garden? It is very beautiful at night with the lanterns." It was small, with each component arranged to give that subtle look of natural imperfection so dear to the Japanese heart—perfect balance is artificial. There were a few bonsai trees in wooden planters, a number of large stones, and several dwarf cherry and plum trees. Ueki joined us, his sandals clapping on the pebbles.

"Ah, I see that Noriko has decided to boast about my humble garden."

"Yes, thankfully."

"And you like the way she looks? She wore the kimono just for you."

"*Hai, kawaii desu.*" Yes, she's lovely. Noriko blushed.

"Indeed," Ueki agreed. "Both of my daughters are beautiful—just like their mother."

We had another of Mrs. Ueki's elaborate meals. A couple of hours later, the Uekis excused themselves and I sat talking to Noriko until the wee hours, learning everything I wanted to know about her. She was twenty-two, worked as a clerk at a bank, had a delightful, musical laugh—and no serious boyfriends.

Our first outing together was another milestone. I had finally worked up the courage to drive a car in Japanese traffic. It was

one of the smaller models, which meant that I had to stoop, bend, and squeeze to get in and out. The first trip I took with Noriko was to the Myozenji Shrine, where we sat on a stone bench while I gave her the story of my life. When we departed, I left behind a lot of personal ghosts.

Several times a week we went to the Tsushima Tei, where the Doi's would bow us in with smiles. Ueki would meet us whenever his schedule permitted, and it became a family gathering.

Neither the inspector nor his wife commented on the amount of time Noriko spent with me, but I had reason to think they were pleased. When the television series *Shōgun* was shown in the States, several Japanese stations carried delayed satellite relays. Ueki invited me for each session.

"This actor is playing a real person," Ueki told me. "His name was William Adams, an English navigator who came to Japan in 1600 aboard the *Charity*." He reached for a handful of cuttlefish. "Adams," he said, "was the man who helped bring Japan out of the era of feudal warfare. What he taught about gunnery, navigation, geography, and shipbuilding was the beginning of Japan's modern age of war technology." He paused for a moment. "Sometimes I wish he

had not done so. My father died on Iwo Jima."

There was a silence. "Mine," I said, "died in Korea."

"If it were not for beautiful women like myself," Noriko interrupted, "you men would never think about anything but war."

We laughed.

The call from Ueki came a little past midnight. "Doi's place," he said abruptly, "and hurry."

Four squad cars were parked in front when I arrived. Ueki and several officers were standing to the side of the doorway, service revolvers drawn. "Akira," Ueki explained. "He went in with a knife and forced the customers out. Now he has the Doi's in there alone."

"Damn it. If you go in, he might hurt them."

"Yes, but we have no choice. Akira has been drinking heavily, and he may decide to hurt them no matter what we do."

"Maybe we have a choice," I said. "That service entrance at the rear of the kitchen. If I go in alone, maybe I can distract him long enough for you to take him by surprise."

Ueki mulled it over. "If you go in, you go as a friend of Doi's. I cannot give you official approval."

"Understood."

I went to the back and pushed open the unlocked service door.

Akira had an armlock on Doi and held a long broad-bladed knife in his other hand. His eyes were glassy, and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Mrs. Doi lay on the floor. I started toward her.

"Please do not come any closer," Doi pleaded. "She has only fainted, and he may injure you." There was no fear in his eyes, only sorrow—and, I thought, shame—shame for Akira.

"Not injure, kill," Akira promised. "And if the police come in, both of you will die."

"Akira," I tried reasoning, "Inspector Ueki must do his duty. Your uncle has done you no harm."

"He has done me much harm," Akira screamed. "He sent Inspector Ueki and you to spy on me at Narita."

"Not to spy, Akira," I said, keeping my distance, "but to see if we could get back your uncle's money. Your uncle would not have you arrested. He only agreed to let a friend try to work it out peacefully."

"Lies, all lies! This old fool would do anything to see the end of the Dai Nippon Party. He is afraid to have a strong Japan again. He should have been glad to give the money willingly, but instead he has for friends worthless policemen and foreigners."

"Let him go, Akira," I begged.

"Yes," Akira said, leering.

"I will let him go." He buried the knife in Doi's chest.

Doi's eyes closed and he slumped silently to the floor.

"If you move, Akira," Ueki said from the doorway, "you are dead." His revolver was steadied on his left wrist, unwavering. Akira froze, and Ueki walked to him, holstering the weapon. "So," Ueki said contemptuously, "Here we have a great hero. A thief who steals from his uncle. A common murderer."

"Not a common murderer!" Akira shouted. "He was a traitor to Japan—to all of our traditions."

"So your life is dedicated to the old traditions, Akira?" Ueki asked sarcastically.

"Yes." He lifted his chin defiantly.

Ueki picked up a knife from the counter and handed it to Akira. "Very well. Then I will allow you the privilege of one of those old traditions. I give to you the right of *sepuke*—honorable suicide. You have killed your noble lord, protector, and benefactor. Under such circumstances, a samurai was expected to take his own life. Please demonstrate your samurai courage for us."

Akira, startled, looked first at me, then at Ueki. The knife clattered to the floor. He lowered his head and began sobbing into his hands. "Take him away," Ueki ordered.

Two officers handcuffed Akira and led him out to a squad

car. "Suppose he had killed himself?" I asked.

"I would have been dismissed. But there was no chance. His actions were those of a coward; he will remain one until the day he's dragged to the gallows. Now let's help Mrs. Doi."

Death travels with its own customs in every country, and we were faced with an emotional ordeal. Mrs. Ueki brought Noriko over to help comfort Mrs. Doi. In the morning, Ueki took the death certificate he and the chief medical examiner had signed to the prefecture office and obtained permission for cremation and burial. Mrs. Doi told us that she had no close relatives, so Ueki made the arrangements.

That evening we began the *tsuya*, an all-night vigil. Doi's body, washed and dressed by the women, lay upon his bed-ding surrounded by flowers. At daybreak we placed the body in a coffin, and Mrs. Doi put a small knife into her husband's kimono sleeve as protection for his soul on its long journey.

"This too, Mrs. Doi," I said softly. I unwrapped the sword Ueki had arrested me for carrying and placed it alongside the body. "He was a brave man who thought of me when his own life was in danger."

"Yes," Ueki agreed, and I was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

Mrs. Doi made a farewell bow

of respect to her husband, and each of us took turns symbolically nailing the lid with a ritual hammer. The hearse came and we followed it to the crematorium, where the coffin was placed before an altar while Buddhist priests chanted and made offerings of incense. At the end of the ceremony, the priests sprinkled our shoulders with purifying salt.

As we filed out, Noriko turned once more to the coffin, incredibly lovely as she bowed. "Sayonara, Doi-san," she whispered.

Noriko and I were snuggled close on the sofa holding hands when we heard Ueki's car pull into the driveway. He walked into the room and glanced at us with no change of expression.

"So," he said, "what date have you chosen?"

"In May, Father," Noriko replied.

"That is, if we have your permission, Ueki-san," I said.

"I have only two demands, Mr. Brent," he said. I waited, afraid to speak. "One demand," he said, "is for Mrs. Ueki." He shouted toward the kitchen. "Wife, bring us that special bottle of Goldflake sake!"

Mrs. Ueki's face, crinkled with smiles, peered from behind the sliding door. "Hai!"

"The other demand?" Noriko asked.

"That one is for Mr. Brent." He looked at me. "Call me To-shihiko. Sam."

About Time

by Linda Evans

Todd consulted his imitation Rolex. He had to leave now to be exactly on time for supper at Maisie's. Todd wasn't exactly Betty Crocker around the home front, but he ran the rest of his life by the clock.

Redheaded Maisie was a ditz and at least ten years older than Todd, but visiting her was better than sitting home counting fibers in the carpet. He hadn't imagined he'd feel lonely. When his wife, LaDonna, kicked him out, along with his sizable collection of clocks, he'd thought, good riddance. But Todd's first few days in the duplex had been pretty bleak and then he'd met Maisie, the occupant of the other side of the house.

Now he rapped on her door and called, "Anybody home?"

Maisie pushed the door open. Her face wore a worried frown. "Sure I'm home, Todd. You don't think I'd ask you over and then not be here, do you?"

Todd rolled his eyes heavenward. Yes, he had to be really scraping bottom to see Maisie voluntarily.

"Relax, Maisie. It's just an

expression." Todd pushed past her and surveyed the living room. Like his own, it was furnished in sagging castoffs from another low-rent district.

"Ohhh. You're teasing me again. Well, sit down. Everything's ready except the desert." Maisie suddenly twisted her hands together and looked away from him. "Todd, I know I promised you a homemade carrot cake, but something awful has happened."

Todd plopped down on the couch. He put his feet up on the particle board coffee table and lit a cigarette. "What's wrong, Maisie? Rabbit steal all the carrots?" He laughed so hard he almost dropped his cigarette.

"No, Todd. I don't have a rabbit." Maisie's blue eyes filled with tears. "It's just that the recipe called for a cup and a half of grated carrots and my one cup measure is missing. See, I have one of those cute little sets where all the cups fit into each other like a puzzle. You know, one fourth, one third, one half, and so on. Well, the one cup is gone, so I can't measure out one and a half cups of carrots."

Todd choked. Maisie trotted over and pounded him on the back.

"Never mind, Maisie. I'll manage without the cake."

Maisie was always this dense. They'd met the day after he moved. She'd screamed for him to come over, yelling, "Help! Something's wrong with my electricity!"

Todd had rushed in to find Maisie's new vacuum cleaner spitting out dirt instead of picking it up. He'd had to show her how to switch from blower to vacuum.

Now Maisie's denseness was going to provide his alibi when he finally did away with Clark, his business partner. Then the entire company, plus an insurance settlement, was his. He was tired of living in the gutter because of LaDonna's exorbitant alimony award.

Oh, he'd never have tried it before, much as he hated Clark. Too easy to get caught. He stood to profit most from Clark's death, so guess where the cops would look first. It was after he'd met the redheaded ditz and they'd agreed to keep spare keys for each other that the pieces fell into place.

While Maisie set the table, Todd picked up her newspaper and idly turned through it. Maisie had circled three headlines, this time. Maisie made a

habit of circling headlines, so she "wouldn't forget what was going on." He glanced at her selections—drowning dog saved, daylight saving time over tomorrow, new shopping center opens. Real important stuff. Todd was glad he had his own brains instead of Maisie's.

"So, Maisie," he said when supper was over and she'd finished clearing up the dishes. "Just about your bedtime, huh?"

"Right. I read in the paper that early to bed is good for your health. I always go to bed exactly at nine." Maisie flexed her arm muscles as if to show what early bedtime had done for her. She giggled.

"Yeah, you told me that once." Todd smiled to himself. He'd just been checking. You could set your clock by Maisie. Bedtime at nine and then up at six to jog. Maisie's early bedtime was part of his plan.

Tonight was Clark's last night. Todd had put his plan into action by sneaking into Maisie's bedroom while she was in the kitchen and setting her clock back one hour. He'd checked the place last time he was here to make sure she didn't have any other clocks.

"What time is it now?" Maisie asked.

Todd looked at his watch without letting Maisie see the face. It read nine o'clock. "Only

eight o'clock," he said.

"Gee, it seems later." Maisie's face briefly held a confused expression and then slipped back to the usual blankness.

Maisie wanted to watch TV, but Todd steered her to the checkerboard he'd set up earlier. If she saw which programs were on, even Maisie would figure out what time it really was.

When his watch read ten, Todd stood up and stretched. "Nine o'clock, Maisie. I'd better get going."

About time, thank goodness. He'd have been more successful teaching a chicken to talk than teaching Maisie how to play checkers. Todd left, calling out a promise to buy her a new set of measuring cups.

Todd's heart pounded as he checked the gun and silencer he'd picked up a few months ago. This was it—the perfect plan. Show up at Clark's place just before one A.M. when Clark would still be up, working on invoices. His partner lived alone, Todd knew, and always stayed up late working.

Todd allowed himself an hour and a half to get to Clark's, though forty-five minutes was plenty of time. He'd timed the trip twice to make sure.

Now Todd waited, crouching in the shrubbery beside the ornate brick house and slapping at insects. Exactly at one o'clock

he slipped into the study through the unlocked french doors. Clark looked up from his work in surprise and had only time to say, "Todd?" before Todd pulled the trigger on his gun.

With trembling hands, he dragged the body out from behind the desk, making sure to pull the plug out of the clock at the same time. The clock hands stopped at a little past one.

Todd quickly trashed the study, making it look as though a struggle had occurred. He overturned a bookshelf, tore up and scattered papers, and dumped over a file cabinet. Last he took Clark's wallet, watch, and rings to signal burglary. All the while he hummed, ignoring his own ragged breathing. Todd had been over this in his mind a million times and still felt as though he'd gagged on a mouthful of dry powder.

On the way home, taking the usual route through a deserted manufacturing district, he tossed his gun and the things he'd stolen into the river. As he pulled into his driveway, he checked his watch for the twentieth time since he'd shot Clark. It had taken him about an hour to commit the crime and drive home. Still plenty of time to finish setting up his alibi with Maisie.

Now he set his own watch back from two A.M. to one A.M.

A few moments later he knocked on Maisie's door. He'd thought he might have a hard time waking her, but Maisie immediately called, "Who is it?"

"It's Todd. I couldn't sleep and I went for a walk. Locked myself out."

Maisie let him in. "That's terrible, Todd. I'll get your spare key."

Todd shuffled his feet on the faded carpet, pretending to be embarrassed. "I'm really sorry about this, Maisie. Gosh, I hate to wake you at this hour. Why it must be—what time is it anyway?" He squinted at his watch, then held it out to her. "Five after one. Boy, I can't believe I'm waking you at *one o'clock*. Some neighbor I turned out to be."

Maisie's brow wrinkled into a puzzled frown as she handed him his key. "You didn't wake me, Todd. And it's really..."

He waved a hand at her. "I've bothered you enough. Five after one." He shook his head. "See you, Maisie."

"Okay. Bye...and thanks, Todd."

Thanks? Todd shrugged. He supposed she was thanking him for letting her give him his key. Just try to figure out a brainless ditz.

In the morning Todd let himself into Maisie's apartment while she was out jogging and

moved her clock ahead an hour. If Maisie noticed the time discrepancy, which was unlikely, since she always showered and then started in on housework as soon as she got back, she'd probably think something was wrong with her electricity again. Either that or she'd think she'd jogged slower than usual. He couldn't help laughing out loud as he slipped back into his own place.

Todd walked over to Maisie's with the police that afternoon. Just as he'd figured, they'd come to him first. He'd of course pretended shock at the news and then outraged innocence when they'd questioned his alibi. Now Maisie would set them straight just the way he'd planned.

While they waited at the door, Todd told his story one more time. "I was here at Maisie's until nine. Then I went home for the rest of the evening and watched TV. At twelve forty-five I went out for a walk. When I returned at one, I realized I'd locked myself out and I asked Maisie for my spare key. I couldn't have killed my partner at one—I was here."

Maisie opened the door and rubbed at her eyes sleepily. As soon as the officer asked her about last night, she lit up like a hundred watt bulb. "Of course I'll help," she said, her voice sounding girlishly high pitched.

"I stayed awake and scrubbed my kitchen floor. See, the papers said to set your clocks back one hour at two A.M. for the end of daylight savings. I could hardly keep my eyes open, but I didn't dare fall asleep or I'd *never* be able to wake up at two. When I finished the floor, I watched the eleven o'clock news and then a movie that was on from eleven thirty till two. The movie ended and I went into the bedroom to fix the time."

Todd groaned. This was all wrong. Couldn't the ditz even tell time?

"But the funny thing is," Maisie's eyes opened wide as saucers. "My clock was already set back an hour. I even called the radio station to make sure of the right time."

"Then Todd knocked. While I was talking to Todd I figured out that *he* must have set the clock for me while he was here,

even though it wasn't time. Todd really loves clocks. But in the morning, would you believe it?" Maisie smiled sweetly. "I came back from jogging and my clock had been moved ahead again."

Maisie playfully slapped Todd's arm. "Todd always teases me, officer."

As one police officer held Todd up to keep him from collapsing into a limp heap on the doorstep, the other officer applied handcuffs to Todd's trembling wrists and then read him his rights.

Maisie blinked in confusion. "Don't worry, Todd. I'm sure it's all a great big stupid mistake, but if you need any more help, just call."

The bigger policeman, the one holding Todd up, chuckled. "Don't worry, ma'am. I'm sure he'll do just that . . . as soon as he has time."

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A Nice Quiet Little Business

by Lorraine Collins

There wasn't any reason for Glenn Temple to be murdered—no reason that made sense to us. He was one of the best-liked men in our little town, one of the most generous, and he'd run his nice, quiet little antique business out there on Brady Road for years, buying things at estate auctions and fairs, fixing them up, reselling them. He loved working with wood and tinkering with old machines. If anybody in this world should have been saved from a violent death, it was Glenn Temple, a friend of mine.

At first I couldn't believe it when Sheriff Wilcox told me Glenn had been found dead in the back of his store, half-buried under the wreckage of a dozen or more of his antiques. All that beautiful furniture had been smashed and hacked with an axe, and Glenn murdered. Who would do a thing like that?

Sheriff Wilcox thought he knew who to look for, and so did everybody else. It took them three days to find him, though. Homer Warren was hiding in a tool shed at the edge of the cemetery, and nobody could figure out what he'd been eating, or

how he'd been sleeping for three days out there, now that the nights were below freezing. Only somebody as simple-minded as Homer would pick a place like that to hide.

Glenn Temple was the only one in town who had been willing to employ Homer and had been good to him for years. That was the pity of it, that Homer had got mad and smashed up everything in the shop and ended up killing the only person who had ever tried to help him. That's what we all said.

Everyone but Linda Dawson. She was the public defender, so of course she had to take a different point of view because she was going to defend Homer in court. Nobody took her seriously, though. Only a year out of law school, and in her first job. She should have been working out a plea bargain, and States Attorney Ben Blake and Judge Farrar were both surprised when she didn't. They asked me to talk some sense into her, but I didn't know how I could do that. I'd known her daddy and mother, and known her since she was a baby, but I retired from the law a long time

ago. To tell the truth, nobody pays much attention to me these days, either.

"Homer says he didn't do it, Henry, so how can I get involved in a deal that would put him behind bars, even for a few years? Can you imagine what prison would be like for somebody like Homer Warren? He's so naive, and confused . . . he doesn't know what happened, but he didn't do it."

"Why did he run away, then? Why did he hide in the cemetery shed for three days?"

Linda took her glasses off and leaned back in her desk chair, shaking her head so her blonde hair flew around her in all directions. Whenever she showed up in court, it was always carefully tied back.

"Homer was scared, Henry. He didn't know what to do. When he got there and found everything all smashed up, the first thing he thought was that he was responsible, somehow. Glenn had been very upset a couple of times recently when some things were missing, and he kept asking Homer if he'd given his keys to anybody, if he'd been careless about locking up."

"Well, had he been?"

"I don't know, and neither does he, really. Anyway, Homer thought Glenn was going to be mad at him, and would fire him

because of all the damage there. He didn't even know Glenn was dead, didn't see the body. Just saw the things smashed up, and ran away and hid, like a little kid. That's how he thinks. That's what I have to convince a jury about."

"I thought they found Glenn's blood on Homer's clothes. Look, Linda, Glenn was a friend of mine . . ."

"We all liked Glenn, Henry. We all want to see his killer punished. But Homer just spent some time thrashing around in there, trying to figure out what had happened, trying to put things together, until he just panicked. He could have got blood on his jacket then, and not noticed. It was barely daylight when he got to work, and the lights were out."

"Linda, Ben Blake has half a dozen witnesses lined up to say that Glenn had talked about letting Homer go, and he'd been pretty upset with him only a week before he died. Now, that's motive. Who else would have a motive? Nothing was stolen, so who else would want to smash up a bunch of antiques and kill Glenn Temple with an axe?"

"I'm not Perry Mason, Henry. I don't have to prove who did it, I just have to prove there's reasonable doubt that Homer is guilty." She got a curious expression on her face and said,

"But it would help if I could suggest somebody else, wouldn't it?"

"And how you planning to do that?"

She picked up a piece of paper that I could see was an inventory list from Temple's shop. She smiled. "Henry, do you know much about the antique business?"

Ben Blake didn't waste any time. He had witnesses testifying about how Glenn's body had been found, and what condition the room was in, and how popular and respected Glenn had been, and how he'd finally lost patience and decided to fire Homer Warren. The sheriff told about how they found Homer hiding in the shed, and they showed the jury the bloodstained coat he'd had on at the time. The murder weapon was identified as an old axe that had been for sale in the store, and even though fingerprints had been wiped off it, Homer's prints were all over the store. Linda didn't ask very many questions, and I admit I was surprised when for her first witness she called Jeremiah Stanton. He was just about the biggest antique dealer in the state, and I wondered why she'd brought him all the way out here.

She walked up to the witness stand, smiling. "Mr. Stanton,

you're an acknowledged expert in the antiques business, and you're often called on to evaluate and authenticate pieces, isn't that so?"

Stanton said it was.

"Mr. Stanton, I have an inventory list here, of the items in Mr. Temple's shop at the time he died. The items that were smashed or damaged have been marked with an asterisk. Do you recognize any of the items on this list?"

When Stanton had looked at it for a minute, he allowed as how he did.

"Do you notice any pattern or relationship in the items that were damaged?"

"Well, it seems just about all of them were pieces that Glenn had bought at the Bennett auction a couple of weeks before he died."

"What and where was the Bennett auction?"

"It was in Cord County, about four hundred miles east of here. Old Mrs. Bennett died without a will, and everything had to be sold to settle the estate. Lots of good pieces she had there. It was a big auction."

"You said just about all the pieces broken were from that auction. Are you sure it's just about all?"

Stanton looked at the list again. "Well . . . all of them, I guess."

Linda turned to look at the jury and asked the question again. "Every single piece that was smashed in Glenn Temple's store came from the same place—the Bennett auction?"

"Yes."

I wasn't the only one in the courtroom wondering what that meant. At least half of the jury was frowning, trying to figure it out, and Ben Blake was staring at the inventory list like he'd never seen it before.

Linda walked back over to the defense table and stood behind Homer. "Mr. Stanton, you were at the Bennett auction when Mr. Temple bought those things, weren't you? Were you surprised at how much he paid for those things? Did he pay more than they were worth?"

"More than I thought they were worth, anyway."

"Mr. Stanton, on that list of damaged items is a small oak lamp table. Can you tell me what Temple had priced that at in his shop?"

"It says a hundred and ninety-five dollars."

"What did he pay for that table at the auction two weeks before his death?" Linda handed him a piece of paper. "Here's the auctioneer's record. Would you please read that to the court?"

Stanton frowned. "He paid two hundred twenty-five for it."

"So he was pricing it to sell

for thirty dollars less than he had paid for it. Is that right, Mr. Stanton?" He nodded.

"Mr. Stanton, how many of those items from the Bennett auction were priced by Glenn Temple at *less* than he'd paid for them? Just look over the list, and tell the court."

Stanton sat looking at the paper for quite a while and then he said, "There are twelve items on this list, and eight were for sale in Glenn Temple's shop for less than he'd paid at the auction. The others were for sale at the same price he'd paid."

"That's a peculiar way to run a business, isn't it, Mr. Stanton?"

Stanton smiled. "I'd say so, yes."

"There's a large oak cabinet on that list, Mr. Stanton. What did he pay for that at the Bennett auction, and what was he willing to sell it for?"

"He paid eight twenty-five, and he had it for sale for seven thirty."

"Would you say it was worth eight twenty-five, or is seven hundred thirty a more realistic price for that piece?"

"I bid up to eight hundred for that piece myself at the auction, but ordinarily I'd say seven hundred to seven thirty would be reasonable."

Linda leaned over the rail of the witness box and stared at

Stanton in disbelief. I was really beginning to admire her technique. "Mr. Stanton, why on earth did you bid eight hundred dollars for that oak cabinet, if you felt that seven thirty was all it was really worth?"

Stanton shifted uneasily and glanced at the judge. "Well, I was bidding for a client. He was willing to go that high."

"How many of those pieces did you bid on for your client?"

"All of them."

"How many did you succeed in buying?"

"Not a single one."

Linda Dawson walked away from the witness stand and leaned against the railing of the jury box. Everybody in the courtroom was looking at her. "Not a single one? Mr. Stanton, most of us tend to think of the antique business as being a sort of quiet, respectable, somewhat dull business. But you know a lot about it, don't you? Sometimes there are stories behind these antique auctions, aren't there? Stories of families torn apart, of bitterness and anger between family members?"

Stanton smiled and said, "I've heard some pretty big arguments over a piano or a bedstead."

"Was some of that kind of thing involved in the Bennett auction?"

"Well—"

"Were you bidding for someone in that family who wanted to keep those antiques from being sold to somebody else? Is that why you were willing to bid so high?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Did you assume that Temple was also bidding on behalf of somebody else? Somebody who was willing to subsidize him so he could pay more than the items were worth?"

"Well, yes."

"Mr. Stanton, who were you bidding for? Who failed to get a *single one* of Mrs. Bennett's antiques because he didn't let you bid as high as Glenn Temple's client?"

Stanton took out a handkerchief and wiped sweat off his face. "Well, my client was one of the sons—Raymond Bennett. He, uh, was quite upset that I—"

"Upset enough to come over here and smash—"

Ben Blake was on his feet objecting before Stanton could answer, but Linda just smiled and walked over toward the defense table. "Mr. Stanton, could you tell me where I might find Mr. Raymond Bennett if, for instance, I wanted to issue a subpoena?"

Well, I always knew Linda Dawson had what it takes. She didn't even have a chance to use her closing speech. After court

adjourned that day, Sheriff Wilcox got in touch with the sheriff of Cord County, who picked up Raymond Bennett for questioning, and it wasn't more than an hour before he blurted out the whole story. He and his brother Daniel hated each other and had been fighting for years over that property, the house and everything in it, which is one reason why poor Mrs. Bennett hadn't ever made up her mind about a will, I have no doubt. When he realized his brother had managed to beat him every single time at that auction, he just came out here to destroy everything. Glenn happened to walk in at the wrong time.

When I congratulated Linda for figuring that out, I did say

I wondered why, if Daniel wanted those things, he didn't keep them. Why was Glenn selling them again?

Linda sighed. "He didn't particularly want them for himself, and didn't want to invest all that money in the stuff. If Glenn sold it, even at a loss, it wouldn't cost him so much. It was enough just to beat his brother."

"Too bad Raymond Bennett didn't just buy the stuff from Glenn, once he knew it was for sale there."

"He decided the best revenge would be to destroy it so Daniel would have spent his money for nothing. I guess if you want to learn about human nature, the antiques business can be even better than the law."

An Honest Man's Legal Justice

by Donald Honig

There aren't many men left in Capstone today who remember Ned Turner, who lived in what he used to call the soldier's shack down at the end of the old trolley run near the Baker Avenue cemetery. It wasn't hardly a cemetery yet, in those years when old Ned was living there. The cemetery was just begun then; there wasn't even a fence around it yet; you could stand on the hill and count the tombstones and not miss a one. That was where Ned had his chicken farm, with the big tin sign out in front that read FAMILY SIZED EGGS - GOOD PRICES. Ned would always be sitting in front of the shack on a tin can, puffing on a corncob, wearing an old blue forage cap that was ex-Union Army property. The chicken farm and the shack too are all gone today because the cemetery naturally expanded with Capstone and there's nothing left of the place that Ned knew.

The reason some of the old men still remember Ned and still talk about him is because he was the only man in Capstone who fought on the Confederate side in the Civil War. Nobody ever erected any monuments to Ned's distinction, of course, but neither was there very much criticism of Ned for taking off to join the Confederates like that because everybody knew the story in those days and most people even wished him luck. Some people say that Ned was probably the only man in the whole of New York State to fight on the other side in that war, and that might be true and it might not.

Ned wasn't a traitor or even a Southern sympathizer or anything like that. He had his reason. He believed in doing what he believed in doing, and that was what he believed was right. He figured that setting his own sense of justice to work was just as important as anything else in the world. The whole thing was a matter of a man believing in the legal way to do things, believing that that was the only way to get complete and honest justice, believing that if you kept faith in the right it would just have to come about . . . and not only believing in all that but going to a good deal of trouble to adhere to his beliefs.

The whole cause of it was the chicken farm—that, and a deck

of dishonest cards and a neighborhood shyster named Pete Mason. Ned lived in Capstone, on that old chicken farm of his, all his long life, except for his time in the army and the time Pete Mason took it away from him.

I suppose there were bigger card games in Capstone than that one, but there never was a more famous one. They played it one snowy night in the old Capstone Hotel that was a stopover, or station, as the oldtimers used to call it, for the Long Island farmers and that was such an old place that they said that President George Washington once stopped over there for a night. The old hotel went back to Mother Earth in one of the town's best fires, in the nineties. The old buggers said that that ancient place just got so tired of standing up that it started the fire itself just to get out of its misery. Anyhow, that was where Ned Turner and Pete Mason turned cards that night. Pete Mason had the reputation of being the lowest, meanest man in the neighborhood. He was a drinker, a cheat, a sneak thief, and everything else that would put a man next to a noose but never quite into one. He was eventually run out of town by an irate husband, but that's got nothing to do with Ned Turner and his story.

The card game—it was draw poker—became more and more involved as the evening wore on. There was five foot of snow fallen outside so there was no place to go and no way of getting there anyway, so the boys sat at poker all night. It came down to Ned Turner sitting with empty pockets. Pete asked him if he wanted to put the deed to his chicken farm into the game. Ned had been drinking a good deal of ale by this time (they said that Pete had stood unusually sober the whole time), and so it didn't take much to persuade him to be doing something that he wouldn't ordinarily be at.

"I reckon my luck can't keep traveling in a straight line all night," Ned said.

"That's right," Pete said. "Every road has got to have its bend."

So Ned was betting against the deed to his farm. The boys said that they never saw so much bad luck come steady to a fellow at cards. Ned kept going down time after time until he had lost everything, chicken farm and all. He just shook his head and looked toward the window.

"She still coming down?" he asked.

"Won't stop till July," somebody said.

"All right," Ned said. "Soon's I get through I'll clear out my gear

and you can take her over. Don't forget to sing songs to them chicks in the mornings," he said to Pete, "if you want 'em to keep layin'."

So a few days later Pete Mason took over the farm and Ned went down to Newtown Creek where he got a job on a barge there. They say it was somebody on the barge who was a friend of Pete Mason's and who didn't know Ned that told him the story of Pete's winning a chicken farm from a fellow who couldn't tell the difference between a crooked and a honest deck of cards.

"Is that the truth?" Ned said innocently, taking a pull on his pipe.

"That Pete Mason's a sly one," the fellow said.

Ned walked up from the creek that night and busted in on Pete and demanded to know the truth of this thing. Pete got all flustered in the face and grabbed his rifle and told Ned to get off his property—which answered Ned's question about the cards being dishonest.

You can imagine how sore everybody in town was when they heard. Some of Ned's friends were of a mind to go down to the farm with pistols, but Ned held them back.

"It wouldn't be legal," Ned said. That was Ned for you right there—everything had to be done legal or not at all; even if Pete Mason had taken him over by fraud, Ned wasn't going to get redress by any but honest legal means, not that he wasn't sore enough to chew bumblebees. "The farm belongs to Pete," he would say, "but Pete belongs to me." That deed was a bona fide legal document and Pete Mason owned it and that was that. But Ned wasn't going to let it rest that easy, everybody knew.

Ned went back to the barge and kept working, steady and patient. "My turn'll come," he said. His friends kept pumping him up to take out and shoot Pete Mason for what he had done.

"That's not the law, boys," Ned would tell them.

"There's a higher law," one of his friends said, "which corrects the shortcomings which written law is hog-tied to do, and that's the law you ought to invoke right now."

"Yes, that's true, boys," Ned said. "But there is even a higher law than yours, which spoke to men when they was writing them there laws which you claim are hog-tied and allow a man to take another's property by fraud, and that higher law than all says that someday soon I'm going to get back my farm and still have my conscience too, having not broken any law, neither legal, moral, nor Biblical, because the existence of right has been proved and

justice shall prevail the same as it has endured," Ned told them, all of which was his personal code taught him by his father who had never stole, lied, nor cheated.

"If people knowed you were that straight," they told Ned, "they'd of run you for mayor."

"I'm just a farmer," Ned said.

But like Ned knew, something reared up and gave him his opportunity. Ned looked at the whole thing from his personal point of view, as though this conflict between the States which was going to shake the continent till every grassblade quivered and every rock and stone was moved from one place to another was some kind of intercession of fate's which had interceded especially for him, to give him a chance to enact his own kind of honest legal justice. The war broke out that spring and Ned heard that Pete Mason had joined up with the -th New York regiment. Pete had got drunk and stole a horse and buggy and drove it down Billy Goat Hill and wrecked it at the bottom, killed the horse and all, and when he heard that the law was after him he figured he'd get out of it by joining up.

Ned thought it over and came to the conclusion that in war it was legal to kill a man, but that it looked like he'd have to join the other side to do it. So he made up his mind and lit out by horse for Richmond and joined up with a Virginia bunch. He promised himself that he'd never shoot at no Union soldier but Pete Mason. His Southern buddies laughed when they heard his story, telling him that there was maybe a hundred thousand men in the Army of the Potomac, but Ned said that that didn't matter as he knew Pete Mason's face and would pick him out of a hundred thousand. Another Reb lad asked him what he'd do when the Unions commenced shooting at them.

"I got my beliefs," Pete said, "and they'll take care of that problem when it arises."

Most of his Southern fellow soldiers put Ned off as either a fugitive or a lunatic, but he wasn't going to shoot at anybody but Pete Mason and that was that. As it turned out they put him in a commissary outfit and he didn't see as much fighting as he might have.

Well, Antietam came and went and so did Fredericksburg and Gettysburg and a lot of other places that you can look up in the books. Ned saw hard times. They whistled some bullets at him, but none ever touched and he kept his pledge and never fired but that

he was aiming at a tree or some clouds. When his commissary outfit was blown to kingdom come by shells at Gettysburg and he never got a scratch, he knew he had right on his side.

There was three years gone, and they were in Virginia someplace when they pulled in some prisoners from the Union and Ned and his boys were giving them a feed before taking them away when he heard that the -th New York was right on the other side of the river.

"Any of you boys ever heard of Pete Mason?" Ned asked.

"There's a Pete Mason in a tent near ourn," one of the prisoners said.

"Where's he from?" Ned asked.

"I don't know," the prisoner said. "All I know is that he's the captain of the card table."

"That's the boy," Ned said.

Ned knew that this was his chance, that all his patience was going to see its reward and that legal justice was at last going to be served. When it got good and dark that night, he took off from camp and tiptoed through the pickets and swam the river. He got through the Union pickets without any trouble and began going through the forest looking for the -th New York and Pete Mason in particular, just walking blind, knowing that fate was on his side, just like a man believing in the stars or something like that, absolutely no doubt in his mind that he'd catch up to Pete Mason now.

It was very dark. The forest was thick and twisted, like a place of brooding hobgoblins. Ned went through it like a native possum. He could see Union campfires up ahead through the trees. Then he passed a couple of fellows who only listened to his New York voice and never noticed his Confederate duds in the dark, and he asked them whereabouts was the -th New York and they waved him over to another part of the woods. He was going over that way when he saw this fellow coming through the trees. The fellow didn't look like a soldier—that is, he didn't walk like a soldier—but he had to be one and Ned knew that only Pete Mason could be a soldier and not look that much like one. So he threw down his rifle on him and said,

"Stop right there, soldier." The soldier was alarmed and stood right there, still as a tree. Ned came through the trees, his rifle pointed businesslike right on him. The soldier was scared froze, like only a man with a whispering conscience can be in the dark.



THE SOLDIER WAS SCARED FROZE, LIKE ONLY A MAN WITH A WHISPERING CONSCIENCE CAN BE IN THE DARK.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Pete Mason," Ned said, stepping up to the soldier, who was looking at him real careful and curious.

"Why, Ned Turner," Pete said. "What are you doing in that getup?"

"Don't you even move to breathe," Ned said, holding his rifle right on him. "I reckon I'm going to get hunk for that card game right now."

"Hey, hey, Ned," Pete said, "you ain't going to do that to me."

"I reckon this here difference in the color of our suits makes it all same and legal," Ned said. "Now don't you try and sweet-talk me out of it neither. I've gone through smoke and hardtack and grapeshot to get to this moment."

"I wouldn't try to sweet-talk you out of nothing, Ned," Pete said, but all the while his mind was burning emergency fuel. Ned picked the gun up to his shoulder and would have done the job right then when Pete said in a right nervous hurry, "Hold back a minute, Ned. You can't do this to me. It's agin the rules of civilized warfare. I'm your prisoner, man. It's agin the rules to do up your prisoner, no matter what personal feelings are in it."

That Pete Mason, he was shrewd all right. Damn if he didn't have Ned stumped again, damn if poor Ned wasn't hamstrung by laws agin. Ned was so mad he could've punched over trees with his fist. But he didn't let on. He was doing some thinking himself.

"It all goes down the pipe in war," he said. "Rules don't make sense nowadays, so I reckon I can let you have it and still put my conscience on the pillow tonight."

That really got Pete het up. "I ain't armed," he said.

"All the better," Ned said, "and thank you for the tip." He brought the rifle up again and aimed it straight between Pete's eyes.

"Gawd, Ned," Pete said, "you can't do it."

"Well," Ned said, "I reckon there's one way you can save your hide, but I don't think you'd want to own up to doing it."

"You just name it, Ned," Pete said.

"I shouldn't even be thinking this because it'll cost me my honor as a soldier."

"Anything, Ned," Pete said.

"Well," Ned said, "you just write down on paper that you defrauded Ned Turner out of his farm by means of a dishonest deck of cards, and put your name on it."

Pete Mason was only too glad. He did it quicker than you can sneeze.

"All right, Pete," Ned said. "You get along now and I'll see you back in Capstone." Pete took the opportunity and blowed out of there right quick and Ned went after him, only Pete didn't know it. Ned hit onto a farmhouse soon and, seeing his Rebel duds, the people there welcomed him like a messiah. He gave them a good story, got a farmer's outfit, stuck a piece of straw between his teeth, and lit out back for home. Once he got past the troop lines he had no trouble. He figured he'd won his own war, and anyway, the way things were going there wasn't going to be no Confederate government to give him comeuppance.

So Ned came back to Capstone, chased Pete's flunkies off the chicken farm, and picked up his work again. There really wasn't much hard feelings against him in town because everybody knew the purpose of his joining the other side and got a loud guffaw out of the way he had throwed down on Pete Mason in the woods and made him admit the fraud.

But then the war was over and home came Pete Mason, looking to get the farm back. He admitted the whole story of Ned's nabbing him in the woods, admitted he signed the paper, but said he had done it only to save his life and that what Ned had made him write about fraud and dishonest cards was not true. When he went down to the farm, Ned was there with a rifle and told him to stay off.

But Pete went up and down Capstone telling everybody that he had been robbed of his lawful property and making such a fuss about it that Ned finally said he would be willing to go to a court of law and once and for all see who owned the farm. Pete said all right. Pete was probably figuring on Ned's being branded a traitor and all that because he certainly was the last man in the world to want to stand up in a court of law and look the eagle in the eye.

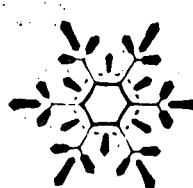

So they went up to Judge Stetterson, who had just then built the big white house on Grant Avenue which that young Dr. Nelson has just now bought. The judge was at that time known as the most honest man in the whole of Queens County. Ned knew he'd get mighty fine legal jurisprudence from him.

The judge convened a court in Bumper Clark's blacksmith shop. Pete went first to plead his case, telling his side of the story. The judge just sat there looking stern and fierce, and how Pete Mason could have ever told a lie to that face was beyond anybody. But Pete did. Then Ned rose up and swore on the Bible and told his end of the story, right from the beginning, through the whole war, right up to that moment, explaining why he did everything he did.

Well, it took the judge only about two deep breaths before he came out with his decision. He told it straight to Pete Mason:


"Do you mean to stand here," he said to Pete, "and say that a man who would undertake the hazard of leaving his home to enlist in a strange army and voluntarily endure the dangers and privations of warfare just to extract what he believed in his heart was just revenge, and then when he had it in his grasp let his code of honor forbid him from executing it, would come to this court and here this day in front of his neighbors tell such an elaborate lie? This court rules unequivocally that the farm in dispute was obtained by Pete Mason via fraud and therefore is the legal property of Ned Turner. Court dismissed," said the judge.

"So I got my farm back for keeps," was the way old Ned used to wind it up whenever folks came down and asked him about the story of how he happened to fight in the Confederate army, "and believe me if I live to be a hundred and people come around wanting to know how I stood it so long, I'll just tell them that I always had a unguilty conscience and a serene feeling in all wrongs being rectified in whatever due time and trouble it might take, just the way the sun is always pressin' to get through dark clouds and always makes it. That's what I'd tell them. Now get on and leave an old man be."




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The Conjuraton

by W. Sherwood Hartman

The man stood hesitantly as he read and reread the lettering on the door: DAN MARTIN, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR. He glanced behind him. The corridor was empty. He tapped the door with timid knuckles and a firm voice told him to enter.

Dan rose from his desk and surveyed the visitor. He was in his early forties, gray at the temples, and with the beginnings of a comfortable paunch. He was also scared stiff. Dan catalogued him quickly as typical suburbia, member of the country club, in the insurance business, officer in a service club, one jump ahead of the mortgage.

Dan shook the nervously damp hand that was extended.

The man's voice was almost treble with strain. "I'm Max Alvis."

"Sit down," Dan said, leaning back in his swivel chair.

Max perched on the edge of his chair as though he expected a surge of high voltage to pass through it at any moment. "I'm in trouble, I think. No, I *know* I'm in trouble, but I don't know how bad."

"What's your problem?"

Max glanced at the door as though seeking escape, then, deciding there was none, started talking rapidly. "You have to understand, it would never have happened if I hadn't been drinking. Normally, I'm a good family man. I'll admit my foot may have slipped on occasion, but I have a lovely wife and I'm a good family man."

Dan listened to the protest of innocence and decided that Max Alvis would cheat with his best friend's wife if he thought he could get away with it. He listened quietly as Max raced through his tale of misadventure. When he finished, Dan asked, "How much did she get you for?"

"Twenty-five thousand bucks."

Dan's reaction was a long, low whistle.

"I had to borrow the money, and I can't afford it, but I was scared—I'm still damned scared. If that guy's dead, I'm in real trouble, regardless of the money."

"He's not dead," Dan laughed sympathetically. "You have been conned, my friend, very neatly, with one of the oldest confidence games in the business. Let's go

over it again. You meet the girl in a bar. She gets real friendly, and you both get more than a little drunk, at least she pretends to be. Then you take her to her apartment, things get real cosy, and in walks another man. She screams, and he pulls her to her feet and starts slapping her around. Then he's suddenly on the floor with a knife in his belly and blood all over his shirt. She's hysterical, and you both get out of there.

"Then comes the clincher. She needs money to get out of town. You have to help her. She reminds you that you are involved just as much as she is. She even hints that it might have been you that had the knife. You're scared, and so you pay.

"Then you watch the papers. Three, four days go by, and there's nothing about a murder. You start to wonder. Then you come to me. Why not the police?"

"Because I thought he was dead." Max tried to light a cigarette, but his fingers weren't up to the job. He broke it in half and dropped it in the ashtray. "He has to be dead. The knife handle was sticking out between his fingers and there was blood all over him."

Dan snorted. "That was nothing but pure catsup. The knife was one of those trick jobs with a retractable blade that you can

pick up in any magic shop. They look deadly, but the point's dull and the blade slides back up into the handle. That guy was washing up and changing his shirt before you were even out of the building."

"Then he's not dead?" Max was still dubious, but the sound of relief was in his voice.

"Not unless he got hit by a bus or something."

"That dirty witch!"

"So, you've been taken. You can go to the police, but I'm afraid it won't do you much good. They've got your dough, and the police certainly can't get it back for you. Even if you can find them, what proof do you have about your story? It's your word against theirs. I'm sorry, my friend, but you've been had."

"That dirty witch," Max repeated. His face reddened as anger replaced fear. He sat seething, drumming his fingers on the edge of Dan's desk. "Get my money back. I don't care how you do it, just get my money back."

"How do you expect me to do that? I have nothing to go on. I don't know who they were. I know nothing, and even if I did, how would I go about getting your money back?"

"Figure something out," Max pleaded. "If you can get it back, we'll split. If I lose it all, I'm dead, but with half of it, I can

manage. Try something, anything... There's half of twenty-five thousand bucks in it for you."

Now Dan was thoughtful. "Okay, we'll try. What did she look like?"

"She was in her middle twenties, well stacked, blonde..."

"Real or dyed?"

Max hesitated. "Dyed."

"Anything unusual? Something different that would help me spot her?"

Max closed his eyes, trying to visualize her. "She wore two rings on one finger, but she wore them on her right hand. I remember that because it seemed awkward, and she had a small mole on her breast."

"Oh, that's a great help."

"No, I mean you could see it. She wore a lowcut dress and you could see the mole."

"It could have been painted on. Women do that—you know, paint on a beauty mark."

"No. It didn't rub off."

Dan smiled an evil grin.

Max bristled. "Look, mister, this may be funny to you, but there's no humor in it as far as I'm concerned."

"Sorry," Dan grunted. "How about the guy? What did he look like?"

"About thirty, dark hair—there was something funny about him—yeah, I remember. The tip of his ear was missing.

Funny how that sticks in my mind. As scared as I was, I can remember that. It was his left ear, I think. That was it, his left ear. It looked like the lobe of his ear had been cut off."

"That could be a lead," Dan commented. "Give me your card and I'll contact you, but don't expect miracles. I have little to go on, but I'll see what I can find out."

They shook hands and Max left. Dan dialed police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Anderson. After a short wait, the lieutenant was on the line.

"Andy, this is Dan Martin."

"Yeah, Dan. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have anything in your files on a guy with a chunk of his left ear missing? He's in his early thirties, has dark hair."

"That's all?"

"That's all I have to go on."

"Okay. I'll run it through R and I and call you back in about twenty minutes." The lieutenant hung up.

Dan opened the bottom drawer of the file cabinet and took out a fifth of scotch. He poured three fingers into a paper cup and added an equal amount of water from the cooler. Then he sat back and relaxed as he waited for Andy to call back. He was halfway through the second scotch and water when the phone rang.

"I have a make on him, Dan. The name's Leo Privet. Six arrests on morals charges, but only one conviction. He served six months four years ago, but we have nothing on him since. He lives in Valley Stream, out on the island. No visible means of support. Has a small home there, but no wife. However, he does have a blonde housekeeper who's a knockout. This is a shady cat, Dan. What do you have on him? I'm curious."

"I don't know, Andy. Give me a couple of days to case the thing."

"Look, buddy, you must have something or you wouldn't have called me."

"I don't have a thing except a client. I don't even have a hunch. Do you have this Leo's address?"

"Yeah, 133 Aldon Street. That's a nice neighborhood, so take it easy."

"I'll be careful. And listen, Andy, if I latch onto anything you can use, I'll let you know right away."

Dan hung up and glanced at his watch. It was five thirty. He finished his drink, threw the empty paper cup in the wastebasket, and headed for the door, carefully locking it behind him. He entered the elevator and pressed the button that took him to the underground parking lot. The attendant brought his four-year-old sedan from the

maze of cars and he slid under the wheel, dreading the ordeal that was to follow.

The car climbed smoothly up the ramp from the cool basement, and as Dan reached the street the searing heat blasted him. He inched his way with the crosstown traffic and finally reached the bridge. It wasn't too bad after he was on the parkway. The air was cooler and he almost enjoyed the drive. There was still an hour of daylight left when he reached the turnoff to Valley Stream. He swung off the main highway and became entangled with the local evening traffic, but only until he found a bar. Then he parked and went in to rinse the city from his mouth with a cold beer.

It was nearly nine when he left, and it was much cooler. He checked a town map at a nearby gas station and located Aldon Street. It was only two blocks from the bar. He cruised around the block then parked three houses from 133 on the opposite side of the street. The evening was beginning to darken. He lit a cigarette and waited.

The blonde came out first. Dan didn't get a good look at her face, but her figure was a rare fascination. There was a brief flash of thigh as she swung into the seat of the sports car that was parked in the driveway, a

quick snarl of the motor, and she was gone. Dan continued to wait.

Another half hour passed, then the garage door opened and a new convertible slid down the driveway, backed around, and smoothly took off past Dan. He couldn't see the driver's ear, but his hair was dark.

Dan reached into the glove compartment and took out a pencil flashlight, a strip of celluloid, and a pair of thin cotton gloves. Then he left the car and ambled across the street with studied nonchalance. When he reached the hedge at 133, he ducked into its shadow and quickly made his way to the rear of the house. He put the gloves on then, and the strip of celluloid opened the spring lock on the back door with ease. Guiding himself with sparing flashes of light, he searched until he found what he was certain would be there, a small, neat wall safe in the study, unimaginatively hidden behind a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*. He left everything undisturbed and drove back to Manhattan.

Dan called Max Alvis the next morning. They met at ten thirty in a downtown sporting goods store where Dan led Max to a large display of knives. "Pick out the one that looks most like the one she used," he said.

Max studied for a moment,

then pointed. "That one is similar."

Dan called a clerk and bought the knife. When they reached the sidewalk, Max asked, "You find out anything?"

"A little," Dan smiled. "Just be patient. Excuse me now, I have some more shopping to do."

The next two weeks were busy ones for Dan. He alternated following the blonde and Leo. Finally a pattern appeared. The blonde would leave around nine in the evening, drive to the station, and take the subway to the city. She would stake out in one of the bars on 57th Street and look for a mark. Leo would leave about a half hour later and drive to the city. He would hover in the background and watch the progress the blonde was making. They made one hit the second week, and Dan followed it with interest.

He had to admit it was a smooth operation. The blonde played it real cool the first night. She and the mark became acquainted and had several drinks and a long conversation. Leo passed by for a visual check. When the blonde left, she left alone. She met the mark the following night. That gave Leo the whole day to check the mark's financial and marital status. When she left the second night, the mark was with her, and Dan was an inconspicuous tail. He

followed them to a nearby apartment house and waited in a doorway across the street. Leo showed up thirty minutes later, smoked a cigarette, then went upstairs. Ten minutes later the blonde and the mark hurried out of the building and into the mark's car. They sped off into the night. Dan still waited. Twenty minutes later, Leo followed at a leisurely pace and headed back towards the island.

Dan studied their timetable until their every move was predictable. Then he made his move.

The first step was to establish an identity. He bought a copy of the *Times* and went down the list of buyers that were in town for the various manufacturers' showings, stopping at the name of Fred Hanson, Jr., representing Hanson's Furniture, Des Moines, Iowa. A check of the Dun and Bradstreet report showed the company to have a triple A rating. Dan decided to borrow the name of Fred Hanson for the next few days.

He went to the blonde's favorite bar that evening, purposely arriving early while business was slow, and engaged the bartender in conversation. He dropped the name of Hanson's Furniture several times, along with a very broad hint that he wouldn't be adverse to some pleasant female companionship. He was on his third martini

when the blonde arrived. She sat several stools away from him and he feigned uninterest as the bartender moved away to wait on her, but he watched them in the bar mirror. There was a rapid, muted conversation, then a nod from the bartender in his direction.

A little later, while the bartender was busy rinsing glasses, the blonde held an unlit cigarette and looked helplessly toward Dan. He stepped around the stools that separated them and, flicking his lighter, offered the flame to her. As she leaned toward the light, he saw the birthmark Alvis had described.

"Waiting for someone?" he asked.

"No. Just having a quiet drink." She looked at him with candid directness. "It's lonely in the city sometimes."

"I know. I'm a stranger here myself," Dan said. Then he asked in a hesitant voice, "Could I buy you a drink?"

"That would be nice."

Dan moved his drink next to hers and ordered another for them both. "I'm Fred," he said for openers.

"I'm Dolly. You going to be in the city long?"

"Just for a few days. I'll be going back to Des Moines after the show."

"The show?"

"Well, actually it's a market.

The furniture manufacturers display their new lines twice a year, and we retailers pick out the things we figure will move, and then place our orders."

"You own a furniture store?"

Dan nodded. "Hanson's, in Des Moines. It's a pretty big operation. Dad started the business, but he's retired now. I have to carry the whole load."

"Gee, that's interesting. Where do they have this show?"

"At the Astor. It takes up the whole fifth floor."

The basic information had been delivered. Dan ad libbed from there on, dividing his attention between Dolly's mole and the mirror. He finally spotted the nicked ear. Leo Privet had arrived. Dolly gave no sign of recognition. Leo had one drink, looked Dan over carefully and left. Dan's conversation with Dolly continued for about fifteen minutes, then he looked at his watch.

"Where did this evening go? I'll have to be leaving. Nine o'clock comes awfully early. It's been nice talking to you, Dolly. I wish we could do it more often."

"I've enjoyed meeting you, too."

Dan hesitated with deliberate shyness, then he made the pitch. "Look, tomorrow's the last day of the show, but there's no reason I couldn't stay over. We could have dinner together and

a few drinks. Or am I being presumptuous?"

"Not at all. I'd love to have dinner with you, but what would your wife say if she knew about this?"

Dan pondered that for a moment, then he grinned. "I won't tell if you don't."

Dolly giggled. "Okay, it's a date. What time?"

"Eight o'clock suit you?"

"That'll be fine. Here?"

"I can't think of a better place."

"I'll look forward to seeing you then."

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and, after one final glance at her mole, he left.

At nine-fifteen the next morning, Dan strolled into the lobby of the Astor, neatly dressed in a charcoal brown business suit and carrying a briefcase. He paused to buy a pack of cigarettes and glanced around the lobby. Leo was seated across the room, seemingly engrossed in the morning paper. Dan pressed the elevator button that took him to the fifth floor, walked down the corridor, then came back down by the stairway. When he returned to the lobby, Leo was gone. Dan grunted admiration of Leo's thoroughness.

He drove out to Valley Stream that afternoon and left the car at the parking lot at the station. Then he took the next train back to the city. It took twenty min-

utes longer to drive out than it did to come back. Dan figured that would be the extra margin of time that he needed.

Regardless of all the preparation, Dan was apprehensive as he waited for Dolly to show for their date. When she walked through the door, he exhaled and the tension left him.

After two martinis, Dan asked, "Where to for dinner?"

"There's a little Italian place near here. It's not real fancy, but the veal parmesan is delicious. You like Italian food?"

"It sounds wonderful to me. Shall I call a cab?"

"We can walk. It isn't far."

It was a quiet restaurant. Candlelight flickered across the red and white checked tablecloths, and subdued music filled the room. The food was excellent. They had a bottle of wine with dinner, then they danced. Holding her, her lush softness tantalizingly firm against him, made Dan wish that there could be another ending to the evening, something completely different from the one he had planned. But the hard facts remained. She was a phony. She and Leo had taken Max Alvis, and who knows how many more, on the same kind of bunco for which Dan had set himself up. He held her a little closer as they danced, aware that he was to be taken, just like the others.

He was just another mark as far as she was concerned. The realization cleared his mind, and he could proceed with his plan with a clear conscience.

Three drinks later, she put her hand on his knee and leaned toward him. A soft fuzziness had crept into her voice. "You're very sweet, you know. I like you." Her head was tilted and her lips were temptingly close, eyes inviting.

"You're sweet too," Dan replied, then he kissed her.

"Mmmmm," she cooed, "that was good, but people are watching. Let's go somewhere else."

"Where would you like to go?"

"We could have a drink at my place. It isn't very far from here."

"That's a wonderful idea," Dan said. He got off his stool with studied unsteadiness. Dolly took his arm and they stepped into the warm night.

"Shall we take a cab?"

"Silly," she giggled, "it's just around the corner."

She clung to his arm as they walked, and her warmth pressed against him. He followed her up the stairs, admiring the view so much that he was sorry there wasn't another flight. She pretended to unlock the already unlocked door, and they went in.

It was an ordinary furnished apartment. The folding bed was open and made, with the covers turned down in invitation. Dolly

fixed them a drink, then kicked off her shoes as they sat on the edge of the bed drinking it. Then she excused herself and went to the bathroom.

Dan moved quickly. He slid his hands under both pillows and found nothing. Then he turned up the corner of the mattress and saw the trick knife hidden there. He replaced it with the one in his pocket and waited. When Dolly came out of the bathroom, she reached for him.

"Be nice to me," she sighed, and Dan hoped that Leo would be a little late. He was gasping for breath when he heard a key turn in the lock and Leo entered.

Dan watched the action that followed with admiration. The acting was hammy, but effective. Leo pulled Dolly to her feet and slapped her hard. They struggled for a moment, then Leo gasped and sank to his knees, a red circle surrounding the knife handle he was clasp- ing at his stomach. Then he fell forward and lay still.

Dolly was sobbing, "Oh, what did I do? We have to get away from here. Hurry!"

Dan hurried, and then ran down the stairs to the sidewalk. Then he took over with positive masculine protectiveness.

"This way, but don't run. Act natural," he commanded as he herded her toward the subway

entrance. They caught the first train and rode to the next stop. Dolly was sobbing. "We get off here," Dan said. "Take hold of yourself." He took her arm and steered her through the short tunnel to where the Long Island express came through. Dolly continued her erratic sobbing even after they were on the train to the Island. She sensed that the play was somehow being taken out of her hands, but she had to make her pitch.

"I've got to get away. I killed him, I know I killed him. I'll have to have money," she gasped a begging sob. "You can help me, can't you? You *have* to help me!"

Dan's answer was a harshly blunt, "Why?"

That corked her sobbing and sugary vitriol couched her next line. "You were there with me, weren't you? It's your fault as much as mine."

"Is it?"

"And how about your wife? What would she say?"

Dan pretended to be in deep thought. "How much would it take for you to get away?"

"At least twenty-five thousand."

Dan hissed a soft whistle through his teeth. "You mean that's all you'd need?"

"It doesn't matter where I go, but I'll need new clothes, a car,

everything. I can't just start out again with nothing."

"That sounds reasonable enough from your point of view, but I had something else in mind," Dan chuckled. "I was thinking of a figure in the vicinity of fifty thousand, but on *my* side of the ledger."

"You're insane," she hissed. "I can tell the police it was you who had the knife. You can fry for this."

"No, dearie," Dan laughed, "your fingerprints are on that knife, not mine." He took the knife out of his pocket that he had taken from under the mattress. "Do you recognize this?" He pressed a button on the side and the blade slid out with a nasty snick. Then he pushed the point of the blade against his palm and it slid smoothly back into the handle. "I switched the knives, baby. You cut Leo real good. It's no game this time. This is for keeps."

Her face was ashen beneath the blonde hair. "You're lying, you've got to be lying."

The train was stopping at Valley Stream. Dan took her arm and she was like a sleep-walker as he led her to his parked car. "Name it," he snapped. "Either we go to the police or to 133 Aldon Street. It's your baby, and my price is fifty thousand. Tonight."

"I don't have it." She was sobbing in earnest now.

"You know where to find it."

"Leo would kill me."

"You're forgetting that Leo's dead. You killed him. Which way will it be?"

She got into the car. "Okay, you'll get your dirty money, you—you Judas."

She trembled all the way to 133 Aldon Street. Dan didn't know if it was from fear or anger, and he didn't much care. She unlocked the front door and he followed her to the den. He pulled the picture away from the safe and demanded, "Open it. Make it fast."

There was fifty-three thousand in the safe. Dan counted out three thousand and gave it to Dolly. Then he unzipped one of the sofa cushions, took out the foam filler, and stuffed the balance of the money in the make-shift sack. "Let's go," he snapped.

"But my things!" she protested. "I'll need time to pack."

"You don't have time to pack. Your clothes won't mean a thing if the police get here before we're gone."

They left quickly and Dan drove her back to Manhattan. After he crossed the bridge, he swung south and took her to Grand Central Station. He locked the money-stuffed cushion cover in the car trunk, then took her to the ticket window. She bought

a one-way ticket to Chicago, and he waited until she was aboard and the train was gone before driving back to his office. It was four thirty in the morning.

He locked the office door behind him and stacked the fifty thousand in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Then he poured a stiff shot of scotch into a paper cup, tilted back in his chair, propped his feet on the desk, and surveyed the shine on his shoes. It had been a profitable venture. He'd call Max Alvis in the morning and give him his twelve thousand five hundred, and still have three-fourths of the fifty grand for himself.

He sipped a toast to Leo. Poor Leo . . . He'd be home by now, pacing the floor, wondering what happened to Dolly and all his money. He'd never know.

Then Dan gave a silent toast to Dolly. It had been a rotten thing to do, making her think he had substituted a real knife for Leo's trick one. The real knife that Max had seen him buy was in the desk drawer. He had used it only to have a pattern to go by when he bought another trick knife to replace Leo's. She'd never know that, either.

Dan dropped the empty paper cup in the wastebasket, folded his arms on the desk to cradle his head, and went to sleep.

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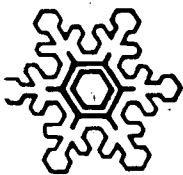
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Catechism for Granma

by Charles M. Saplak

I'll go to Hell for sure.

You go to Hell if you hate your granma, and I sure as Hell hate mine, and Granpaw, too. I wonder about Hell, about the fire and all, and remember the time I burnt all the skin off three knuckles of my left hand on the stove at school. Boy, that hurt bad.

Right now, though, thinking about Hell ain't so bad, because I think about how cold I am. When I started out down here, I was just chilly, but if you're chilly long enough you're cold, and I been down here in this cellar long enough—all day! I never thought my own granny would put me here. I've never heard of a granny as mean as her!

Let me start at the beginning. For the first nine years of my life I never knew Granma and Granpaw Toschar except as the funny couple in a picture on Mama's dresser. You couldn't tell much in that picture except that Granpaw was skinny and sitting down with his hat in his hand, and Granma looked skinnier and stood up with her hand on his shoulder. I never really thought too much about them being alive, although Mama would cry over their picture and told me sometimes that they were still in "Checkoswowokkeeha," which is where all old folks live, because Papa calls it the Old Country.

When Papa and I sit on the porch, he puffs his pipe and tells me to be proud of "Checkoswowokkeeha." Once I told him that when the boys at school called me dumb Pollack or dumb Bohunk I blacked their eyes, but when they called me dumb Check I just twisted their arms and put them in the dirt, and we were friends afterwards. Papa smiled at that.

I never told Papa that when the big fat nuns take rulers to my hands and call me Pollack I sneak in at lunch and break their chalk into dustpiles.

Then about two months ago Mama got a letter, and danced around saying that her Nana and Poppy were moving to a farm outside of Wheeling. Papa just puffed his pipe and asked why aren't they coming here first, and I think he didn't want them to come



THE DOOR FLEW OPEN AND GRANMA STOOD THERE, MOONLIGHT SHINING ON A FACE THAT WAS UGLIER THAN ANY I'D EVER SEEN. IF I LIVE TO BE ONE HUNDRED I'LL NEVER FORGET THAT FACE.

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but felt that it made us look bad because they weren't coming to stay with us. I don't think Papa ever feels just one thing at a time, like Mama when she dances or cries feels one thing at a time, which is probably why Papa never laughs or cries.

I didn't think this would make any difference to me, but one day Mama came out to meet me when I was coming home from school and told me I was going to stay with Granma and Granpaw Toschar when school was out, and wasn't I happy? I should have known by then it was going to be trouble because Mama was smiling so big and I knew deep down that the last thing I wanted was to go to the house of Granma and Granpaw near Wheeling.

By that time I had beat every boy in school on the playground, and beat most at reading and doing numbers, and they didn't call me "dumb" anything. They even wanted me to play baseball with them all summer and I wanted to.

More than one thousand times I asked Mama to not go, and more than one thousand times I asked why Papa and Mama could not come along.

More than one thousand times Mama said that Papa had to work in the mines so long as they had the work, and she had to clean houses for the citizens in town so long as they wanted her to, that if she asked to go for a long time, they would not want her back to work.

So I left school that last day and carried home ribbons for best in arithmetic and best in handwriting, and a rosary of glass beads for saying the most catechism. With these prizes and a whole summer ahead of me I should have been happy, but all I could think of was a summer with the skinny people in that faded picture.

Mama packed me up with almost all the clothes I owned and made me take the ribbons and rosary from school. I didn't care one bit whether Granma or Granpaw saw the ribbons. I felt like crying or asking again to not go, but somehow, when Papa stood there puffing his pipe and looking at me, I knew that he wouldn't cry or ask not to go, so I shouldn't either.

Finally Papa walked with me to town and left me with Mr. Brammer. Before Papa left I thought for sure I would cry, but Papa reached into his pocket and pulled out a pocket knife, which he gave me. He said not to tell Mama or Granma that I had it, and I think that made it twice as much fun to have.

I don't really know how long it took for our wagon to get here. All I really remember is that the whole way up Mr. Brammer

chewed on a big black plug of tobacco. The night of the first day we camped beside a lake. On the second day he offered me some tobacco from his plug and I cut it with the new pocket knife. I got so sick I had to lie in the back of the wagon, and Mr. Brammer laughed so much tears ran down his fat cheeks.

Toward the evening of the second day Mr. Brammer stopped the wagon and pointed down a long red-dog road. He started throwing my bags out of the wagon and said that my grandparents lived down that road, and that he would take me all the way except he still had to get to Wheeling, and my Papa hadn't paid him that much.

I thought for a long time about the possibility of running away right then, but I remembered Papa's knife and found myself walking down that noisy gravel road. Before I knew it I was here.

I guess I had pictured that Granma and Granpaw would come running out to hug me and make a big fuss and take me in where they had a big meal fixed and that she would pinch my face and that he would want to mess up my hair. I'd seen other boys with their grandparents.

But as I came up on the big house with the big porch and the weedy yard, nobody came out. After a while I knocked on the door, but there was still no answer. I would have yelled, but I was too scared. I wasn't worried about the neighbors; all the way down the gravel road after Mr. Brammer let me off, I never saw any sign of anyone living out here, nor any branches in the road. I didn't think to wonder about why they lived so far away from everyone else.

I didn't know what to do. I felt lost and was mad at Mama and Papa for ever sending me away. It never came to my mind that I should just walk right in, so I sat down on the steps of the porch and curled up against the big pillowcase full of clothes I carried.

I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew, Granma and Granpaw were on the porch with me, Granma lifting me up, Granpaw carrying the bags. I could only see them by the dim light coming from the windows of the house because the sun had already gone down. They didn't come out and give me the big hellos like I pictured; they didn't even come out and wake me up, they just picked me up and carried me into the house.

Inside the parlor, they sat me down in a dusty chair, then sat across from me on their couch to have a look at me. My heart was

in my throat and I was scared to talk. While they looked at me, I was looking at them.

They were the same people from the picture, but older and even skinnier. You don't often see people that skinny. They only had one little kerosene lamp burning in the whole living room, and that was burning really low. In that orange light I couldn't see a lot of details, but they looked sick somehow.

One more thing, but it's hard to say. The picture Mama had was black and white and grey. Now I was seeing them in real life, and they looked as pasty as ever, like their faces were drinking up the light and color from that kerosene lamp.

It wasn't long before the questions began. What about Mama? How much did we have to eat? Did Papa work? A thousand questions, most of which I couldn't answer. I never thought about this until now, but most old people I know can't talk without funny sounds on everything they say, because they're used to talking in Old Country talk. Not Granma and Granpaw, though. They spoke American perfectly . . . I guess they're really smart because some old people have been here years and only talk Old Country.

We must have sat there for hours, them asking about a thousand questions. They didn't ask anything about school or my friends, but couldn't hear enough about how often Mama went to church and what I remembered about what the priest says at church. They also couldn't ask enough about how much I play and what I eat. I didn't really know what to tell them, but they would ask question after question about food, even asking about what sort of pots and pans Mama cooks with.

Because they didn't ask anything about school I almost forgot to tell them what Mama made me promise I'd tell them. When I got a chance to talk I piped up about the ribbons I had in school. I took them out to show, and to tell the truth, Granma and Granpaw didn't make the fuss over them that I was afraid of. Then I told them about the prize I got for catechism reciting, which was of course the little rosary with the purple glass beads. I dug around in my pillowcase until I found the little wooden box.

It's hard to explain the next part. When I opened up the box, both Granma and Granpaw, who were pasty-faced anyway, went solid white. I mean, I thought I could see through 'em. Granpaw started sputtering and Granma jumped up and closed her hand around both the box and my hand, shutting the box. Her hand was like a big bony spider, but it was *strong*.

Granma took the box and said that she wanted to look at it awhile, after I went to bed. Granpaw, who still looked so white I could swear he was clear, said that's a good idea, and he picked up my things and took them all to a bedroom upstairs.

The only light downstairs was that one kerosene lamp, and the only light upstairs was what moonlight spilled in through the windows, but I could see that their house wasn't like Mama keeps our house. For one thing, Mama believes that the more pictures and pillows and lace doilies she can keep in the house, the better. Granma's house had furniture, but just a little furniture, and none of the extras. Another thing, my Mamá keeps the house clean. Way too clean, as a matter of fact. Granma's house was dusty and smelled like the basement of our house. Even in that dim light I could see it was messy.

The room Granpaw showed me to was small and had a bed, a chair, a dresser, and one tiny window, about one foot from the ceiling. He dumped my things on the bed, then left without a word, closing the door behind him.

I think that at that moment I came the closest to crying as anytime during the whole deal. Right now back home my friends were probably running wild. They were coming up on a summer of swimming, baseball, and picking blackberries to earn dimes for the picture show. Meanwhile I was in the middle of nowhere just outside of Wheeling living with two strange old pasty-faced skeletons who were nothing like Mama said they would be. I thought about running away, and came real close to doing it.

The only thing that stopped me was the fact that when I crept over to the door and turned the knob, I found that it was locked. If I hadn't been afraid of making enough noise to wake up Granma and Granpaw, I would have tried to bust the door open.

I even thought about pushing the dresser over to where I could climb up on it and get to the little window where the moonlight was streaming in, but I realized that it was way too small to climb through.

Since there was no way out, I decided to just go to bed. I didn't even take my clothes off, but got under the musty old covers and tried to go to sleep.

As bothered as I was by everything, I couldn't go to sleep. I did something then that I never do at home. I tried to go to sleep by reciting lessons in my head.

I went through the presidents and the state capitals, multipli-

cation tables and even practiced handwriting in my mind. Still I couldn't sleep, so I tried reciting some of the catechism lessons the nuns liked to beat into us so much.

After about five minutes of that, the door flew open and Granma stood there, moonlight shining on a face that was uglier than any I'd ever seen. She said that I was talking too loudly and that it was keeping Granpaw awake, and that he didn't feel good anyway, so I had to stop. I just croaked a weak, "Yes, Granma," and she shut the door.

If I live to be one hundred I'll never forget that face.

I hadn't even known that I'd been talking out loud.

I guess I got to sleep eventually, but I don't know how. I can't remember my dreams, but I know that they were filled with snakes and rats and graveyards and bones. I think I remember tossing and turning and kicking at the covers because I felt like they were holding me to the bed and strangling me.

The moonlight had faded from the room and the sun wasn't up yet when the door opened again. At first I didn't see anybody there and wanted to sit up and say something but just couldn't get up. It was like I was still asleep and dreaming that I was awake, but thought that I was dreaming. I couldn't tell my arms and legs what to do.

Then Granma and Granpaw came into the room. It wasn't like they were walking, but just standing straight up and floating, like they were in a dream, too.

Granma pulled back the covers and Granpaw picked me up. They took me down the stairs and out through the front door. All this time I couldn't move. I was surprised that they were able to carry me, but I'd already seen how strong Granma could be when she shut up my rosary case.

We went down the front steps, floating more than walking. We went to a door by the side of the house and they took me down some stone stairs and dropped me on the floor. Then they left. I could hear them behind the closed door for what seemed like five minutes, locking the door and making sure that it was shut up tight. All this time I just lay on the dirt floor, unable to get up. Then it all faded, like nightmares do.

I woke up and sunlight was coming through little cracks in the storm door. The room I'm in smells terrible, like wormy dirt. I've been down here most of the day.

I think they put me here because they know that I could have kicked open that door to the bedroom. The door down here is thick and the locks are too strong. There's no window and no other door.

I don't know what they want to do with me, but I don't think it's anything good. I felt my way around down here and found that it's a kind of cellar. There are shelves of jars of stuff that Granma probably canned herself.

I got hungry after my first couple of hours down here and decided to open up one of the jars to get something to eat. It was too dark to see what was in it.

When I finally got one open and put it to my lips I threw up. I knew what the stuff was because last summer I cut my hand on a hatchet and sucked on the cut like I'd seen people do.

I don't hate Mama or Papa for sending me here because they didn't know. I don't hate Mr. Brammer for sending me down the road alone, because even if he had brought me all the way he probably would have just left me at the porch and I'd still be here now.

I do hate Granma and Granpaw, though. I hate them a lot. Even if they aren't the same people that Mama remembered, even if they aren't the same people from the picture, they're still Granma and Granpaw, so I'll probably go to Hell.

But I've got that knife that Papa gave me. I've broken down a shelf and stomped it until it splintered, and I'm working one of the big long splinters into a good point with this knife. Working on it warms me up, even though the cellar here is cool. My hands are full of splinters, but I'm not crying about it.

They'll be back for me. Granma and Granpaw are strong, but I'm strong, too, and I've whipped boys older than me and bigger than me. I'm also fast and they're probably going to be very surprised when they open the door and I'm not sitting in the dirt crying, but standing here waiting with my sharp sticks. I can also shout out my catechism lessons so loud that their ears ring while they try to grab me.

Maybe I'll go to Hell for this, but if I do, I'm taking somebody else along.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Olsrud

Magdalen Nabb, last reviewed in these pages in August of 1989, has added another to her Marshal Guarnaccia series. **The Marshal's Own Case** (Scribners, \$17.95, 175 pp) follows the phlegmatic marshal on the first case in which he is completely in charge. And he doesn't feel competent to run it. But then, no one else wants it and it isn't supposed to be solved anyway—it deals with murder among the transsexual and transvestite prostitute community of Florence. He must also resolve a growing problem in his own family, when his son begins to misbehave in school and run around with a "bad" crowd. Perhaps the most information about the marshal and his family to date.

Tony Hillerman has written another Joe Leaphorn-Jim Chee mystery. In **Coyote Waits** (Harper & Row, \$19.95, 292 pp), Leaphorn looks into the murder of another Navajo policeman when a relative of his wife asks him to do so as a favor. It seems that the suspect, Hosteen Ashie Pinto, arrested by Jim Chee at the scene, is distant kin through his wife's clan. Meanwhile, Chee finds that Janet Pete is back and has been assigned to defend Ashie. Janet doesn't believe in her client's guilt, and Chee, in an effort to prove that he has done at least one right thing, investigates to prove her wrong. Leaphorn and Chee alternate in this book until near the very end when their investigations merge into the denouement. A

very quick, pleasurable read, with Chee and Leaphorn's antagonism a nice foil for the action.

If you are a new Hillerman fan, and missed out on the early books in the series, keep an eye out for **The Jim Chee Mysteries** (Harper & Row, \$15.95, 512 pp), a collection of the early novels *The Dark Wind*, *People of Darkness*, and *The Ghostway*. This collection, scheduled for release in October, 1990, is a "sequel" to 1989's **The Joe Leaphorn Mysteries** (Harper & Row, \$14.95, 499 pp), which compiled *The Blessing Way*, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, and *Listening Woman*. In addition, many of Hillerman's earlier works, including some from these two collections, the later *A Thief of Time* and *Skinwalkers*, and the non-Navajo *The Fly on the Wall* have recently been reissued by Harper in paperback (\$4.95).

Perhaps no one writes mysteries set in the Victorian era with as much feel for the people and the mores of the time as does Anne Perry. Her latest installment in the Charlotte and Thomas Pitt series, **Bethlehem Road** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 309 pp), is no exception. Members of Parliament are being killed, their bodies hung from a lamppost on the Westminster Bridge. Women's suffrage, and the politicians' opposition to it, may be the only common thread. Thomas is assigned to the case by his superior with the full knowledge that the public will soon clamor for solutions to these crimes. Meanwhile, Charlotte is taken with her sister's remarriage and honeymoon and is slightly envious of Emily's opportunities. Great-aunt Vespasia calls Charlotte in to help an old friend whose niece may be a suspect, distracting Charlotte from thoughts of Emily's honeymoon adventures and setting her on the trail to clues that help Thomas solve the murders.

Susan Kenney's third installment in the Roz Howard/Alan Stewart series, **One Fell Sloop** (Viking, \$16.95, 292 pp), is an exercise in puns (Latin as well as English), deep-water sailing, wildlife conservation, and murder. Roz and her Scottish lover Alan are sailing her aunt's old boat down the Maine coast when they happen upon a body on an island. Footprints lead to the body from a dinghy, but they aren't the body's footprints. Alan and Roz are certain that murder has been done and fix on a possible murderer and motive but not the means. From Maine's Northeast Harbor to Penobscot Bay, we follow them as they attempt to solve a crime all others consider an accident, to locate a mysterious "Black Ship" which might contain witnesses, and to straighten out what appears to be a real glitch in their long-distance relationship.

Carol McD. Wallace's **Fly by Night** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 231 pp) is a thriller-romance set in Paris. Louise Gerard has just broken up with her boyfriend of six months because he has been philandering and because he has a terrible temper. Now he seems to be harassing her with late night phone calls and prowlings around her flat. There is a brief respite while her father visits, but when he is arrested at Heathrow airport on the way home for smuggling stolen goods and drugs, Louise finds herself under the additional pressure of detection—who planted the medieval missal in her father's luggage? The story culminates in one of the best-written chase scenes I have read in recent years. True, Louise does all the silly things that had-I-but-known heroines do, but the story holds one's attention to the very end.

Blackwood's Daughter by Harriet La Barre (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 264 pp) is another romantic thriller, but not at all in the same vein as *Fly by Night*. Faron Blackwood is in England, promoting the revival of her long-deceased father's books. An old friend of her father, a cartoonist, is murdered in a squalid Soho flat. When more men are murdered in the quiet village where she has been engaged to speak, Faron and her new-met love, landscape architect Harrison Jones, become suspects. But there is more to this mystery than just plain murder. Why does Faron's friend and agent seem so nervous? Why is the offensive Gideon Wiss so sure that Faron will allow him to write the biography of her father? Why is Simon Maxwell, poet and fan of her father, so secretive? While Faron and Harrison investigate, Detective Inspector Piper of the local CID solves the murders, leading only to more confusion and a final, unexpected confrontation.

Richard Michaelson is retired from the State Department after a long and distinguished career. Desmond Gardner is a former senator from the midwest who is now serving time in the Federal Minimum Security Correctional Facility at Fritchburg for influence peddling. The two are brought together when Gardner is harassed by an officer of the attorney general's office about an investigation into illegal manipulation of sugar quotas in Congress. When Sweet Tony Martinelli, a Miami hood, is killed in a locked storeroom in the honor "bungalow" where Gardner is confined, he is, of course, the prime suspect. **Washington Deceased** by Michael Bowen (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 201 pp) is a classic locked-room mystery. The plot is well-constructed, the Washington social scene and conditions at the "country club" correctional facility are ironically described. A worthy successor to Bowen's first novel, *Badger Game*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



An early look at Rusty Sabich's idyllic home life reveals little about the dark turn he takes in **Presumed Innocent**, a thinking-person's film based on the novel by Scott Turow.

In this trip through the criminal justice system, we are treated to the ambiguous nature of guilt and innocence. The story is highlighted by a compelling murder trial but also features glimpses of infidelity, political corruption, promiscuity, unbridled ambition, and misguided loyalty.

Our hero, or perhaps our villain (Harrison Ford), lives in a solid-looking suburban house. His wife Barbara (Bonnie Bedelia), although a bit timid, is pretty and smart—she's working on her dissertation, in math. The two dutifully take their son to his local public school in their station wagon. But there exists a barely discernible distance between husband and

wife. Just a sad look, an extra-long glance, a remark. There is something wrong with this picture as Rusty boards a ferry for the scenic ride to work.

Work for Sabich is in the municipally-grim office of a county prosecutor. He is the most trusted assistant to Chief Prosecuting Attorney Raymond Horgan (Brian Dennehy). So, when the shocking news comes that co-worker Caroline Polhemus (Greta Scacchi) was found in her apartment brutally murdered and perhaps raped, Horgan assigns Sabich to the case.

"She was a beautiful, sexy gal," Horgan laments. "And a hell of a lawyer," he adds almost as an afterthought. His main concern, however, is how the crime will affect his tight race for reelection.

Sabich is reluctant to take on the case, and through flashbacks we learn why. The normally tightlipped, hard-driven

lawyer had succumbed to lust. As a result, he carried on an extramarital affair with his steely-eyed, flaxen-haired co-worker.

But when Polhemus discovers her lover is not as ambitious as she wants him to be, she dumps him as if he were nothing more than an old legal problem motioned out of order. While he remains obsessed, she moves on to new, more useful prey.

As details of the grisly murder spill out, Sabich increasingly behaves as if he has something to hide. Meanwhile, with the election looming like a ticking clock, his boss is pressing him for a quick solution to this murder mystery.

When the political tide changes, Sabich sees his role reversed. The prosecutor becomes the prosecuted when Sabich is charged with the murder of Caroline Polhemus.

Although there are some plot lines in the film that simply add confusion along the way—particularly the search for a missing case file, dubbed a B-file—the road leading to a dramatic murder trial unfolds gradually, steadily, and tautly.

The trial, presided over by a strong-willed, no-nonsense judge (Paul Winfield), is dominated by defense lawyer Sandy Stern (Raul Julia), whom Sabich calls his “toughest adversary,” recalling the short while ago when

as a prosecutor he did courtroom battle with him. Stern hammers away at hostile witnesses with deftness.

Harrison Ford shows a stern face in this role of accused killer, leaving the viewer unsure as to his guilt or innocence. He appears tightly wound, but never really breaks.

The trial itself, although filled with the minutiae of such proceedings—physical evidence like carpet fibers, blood types, etc.—is spellbinding. This is in large part due to Julia, who as the defense attorney lays out his case in a thoughtful, logical manner. Outside the courtroom, he is a man of few words but is expressive nonetheless.

Greta Scacchi, as the murdered colleague, is not on screen for long but is memorable as much for her beauty as for her lust for power. Brian Dennehy is appropriately gruff in his role as chief prosecutor. He has played enough law enforcement characters (in *Gorky Park* and *Best Seller*, to name a couple) to comfort any citizen who might see him in a courtroom or patrolling a beat. Bonnie Bedelia does well as the nervous but supportive wife.

Those fans of crime films who have had their fill recently of bullet-loaded bad guys and fast-driving heroes will find *Presumed Innocent* a welcome break.

THE STORY THAT WON



© N. Joy Jaffee

The August Mysterious
by Michael C. McPherson
Canada. Honorable men-
Villa Park, Illinois; Art
ginia; Jeri A. Sheaffer of Canton, Ohio; Chuck Graham of Wilton, California; Mary
Ellen Kimsey of Pueblo, Colorado; Mark McMillen of Pensacola, Florida; A. C. Stone
of Windsor, Ontario, Canada; and Kris Meyle of U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado.

Photograph contest was won
of Fort McMurray, Alberta,
tions go to Orest Akulow of
Cosing of Fairfax, Vir-
ginia; Mary Ellen Kimsey of Pueblo, Colorado; Mark McMillen of Pensacola, Florida; A. C. Stone
of Windsor, Ontario, Canada; and Kris Meyle of U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado.

FOILED AGAIN by Michael C. McPherson

Reginald wrenched out a chunk of his own hair. "I can't believe you're that stupid, Monty!" he screamed at his partner. Cringing from fear and guilt, Monty could only study one-inch tiles on the kitchen floor. "I told you to monitor the patrol car, to let me know when he was out of the area. Not steal his car."

"You want I should take it back?" Monty shuddered a response.

At first, Reginald Horndecker threw out his hands in despair, then his eyes lit up. "No," he said. "On second thought, maybe it's a good idea you took the rookie's car. He'll be too embarrassed to report it stolen. He'd be the laugh of the precinct. If anything, he'll spend his time trying to find it. In fact, he'll be so busy looking for his car, he won't have time to cruise Darlington Avenue at all. We can hit that computer store, grab the goods, and be out of there before the owner has time to format a disk."

Monty smiled; but it was short-lived.

Standing in the doorway and yawning, Patrolman Watson aimed his Policeman's Special at the duo. He'd heard every word.

Wrenching another chunk of his hair out of his head, Reginald turned and went red as he stared down Monty. "What's your answer for this one?"

Monty shrugged, his eyes counting tiles. "He was asleep in the back of the car," he said. "I didn't have the heart to wake him."

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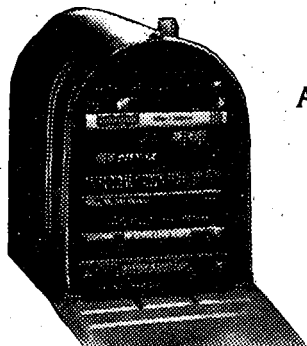
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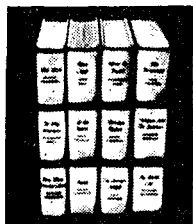
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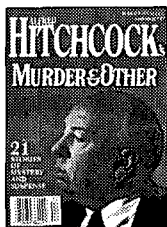
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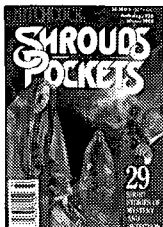


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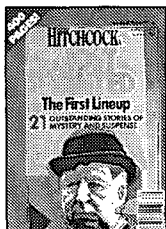
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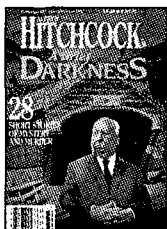
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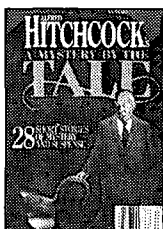


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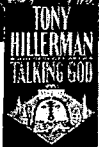
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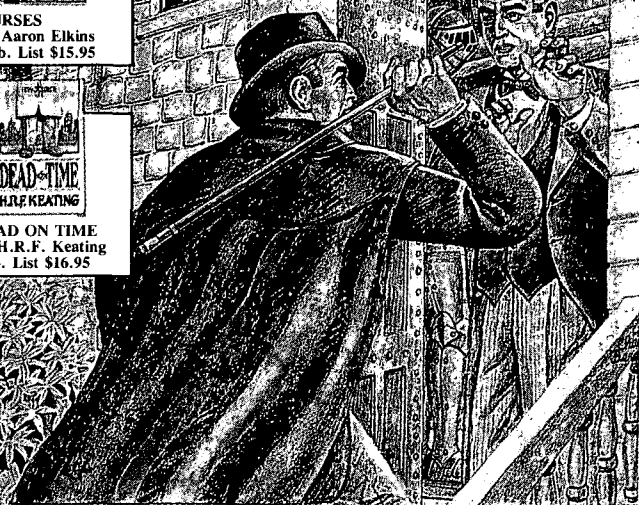
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